

With flu season on the horizon, Q&A on this year's vaccine

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School's back, summer's over, and area pharmacies are enticing customers with low-cost flu vaccinations on every corner.

The Baltimore Sun checked in with Dr. Kathleen M. Neuzil, director of the Center for Vaccine Development at University of Maryland School of Medicine, and area pediatrician Dr. Dan Levy, to pose questions about this year's [influenza vaccine](#).

Q: When should I get a [flu shot](#)?

A: Now would be good.

"Flu season in Maryland is usually between October and April," said Levy. "It tends to peak out

in colder months when kids are indoors coughing on each other."

To prepare, Neuzil advises getting a flu shot by the end of October. But sooner may be better for some people. "It's more important to get the dose than to wait and not get a dose."

The vaccine takes a week or two to be effective, and those who wait may be out of luck if the flu hits early.

Children getting the flu shot for the first time need two doses, four weeks apart. "Absolutely children need to receive a vaccine as early as possible," Neuzil said.

Q: Who should get a vaccine?

A: Almost everyone. The Center for Disease Control recommends that everyone older than 6 months get a flu vaccine.

Q: I'm healthy. Why do I need a flu shot?

A: It's not all about you.

"There are a lot of young healthy people who feel invincible and don't believe they need the flu shot," said Neuzil. "Also remember that you're getting an influenza vaccine to protect the people around you," such as babies, elderly folks and those with compromised immune systems.

Levy talked about the principle of "herd immunization—meaning "the more people in a population you get covered with a vaccine the more likely it is that you'll prevent an epidemic," he said. "If children don't get sick themselves, they can't spread the flu."

Q: Is this year's flu going to be bad?

A: Hard to say. Influenza can be a life-threatening

illness, but its virulence varies from year to year.

"My favorite line is 'influenza is predictably unpredictable,'" said Neuzil.

Although last year was a severe season in the United States, it was less severe in other parts of the world. Doctors can't say when it will hit, or how virulent it will be.

Q: Can I get a [nasal spray](#)?

A: Yes. This year the nasal spray will be widely available in the United States. Neuzil says it's just as effective as a shot for people ages 2 and older. "Traditionally the nasal spray has worked extremely well in children," she said.

In past years, some authorities had been cautious in endorsing the nasal spray, Neuzil said. But it was widely and successfully used in the U.K. last year, and other studies have proven its effectiveness.

This year, "Parents can use either the spray or the shot as long as the child is at least 2 years or older."

The CDC recommends the nasal spray flu vaccine (or live attenuated influenza vaccine) as an option for non-pregnant individuals ages 2 to 49.

Q: Are there any risks associated with the flu shot?

A: No. "I think there is a lot of hesitancy about vaccines in general," Neuzil said. But the flu shot has been around for a long time—and scientists have studied it to prevent side effects. Common side effects include a sore arm from the shot or a runny nose from the nasal spray.

While older versions of the vaccine, perhaps 40 years ago, may have caused some side effects, modern vaccines are well-tolerated, Neuzil said.

Q: Is it possible to get the flu even after being vaccinated?

A: Yes. "The vaccine is never 100 percent effective," Levy said.

Still, even for those who do end up getting the flu, the vaccine will help it be less severe, and it will be less likely that the patient ends up in the hospital.

Levy said about 180 children died in the U.S. from flu last year—he thinks many of those deaths could have been prevented had the kids been vaccinated.

Q: Can I get sick from the flu shot?

A: No. "You cannot get sick from the flu shot," Neuzil said. "There's no live virus there."

A small portion of people may find that they coincidentally get a headache the following day and may be tempted to blame the [vaccine](#). "It's human nature to correlate the two," she said.

But in reality, she said, the flu shot doesn't make people sick. "Sometimes there are other viruses that are circulating in the community."

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