

Ask Dr. Anne

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Pam Bryant] Hello, I'm Pamela Bryant. I'm a mom and a CDC worker, and just like you, I have questions about the new H1N1 flu and the H1N1 flu vaccine. With me today is Dr. Anne Schuchat, a chief scientist at CDC, who will share information with us on some common questions about the new H1N1 virus. Dr. Anne, so you're a chief scientist and Director for CDC's Immunization and Respiratory Diseases Center. What's with the uniform?

[Dr. Anne Schuchat] You know, I wear the uniform because I'm part of the U.S. Public Health Service Commission Corps. It's a non-military uniformed service. I'm a doctor, but a lot of people think I'm an airplane pilot. But I'm actually just a CDC worker like you. I've been here over 20 years.

[Pam Bryant] Okay, so you've had a great career at CDC. I understand you've been very busy talking with many different people about H1N1. Tell us, what is H1N1, and how is it affecting people?

[Dr. Anne Schuchat] The H1N1 influenza virus is new. It just emerged last spring in 2009. And, you know, some people have heard of it as "the swine flu." Important to know that this doesn't have to do with eating pork or touching pigs or anything. This is a virus that's affecting a lot of people right now. And we're working hard on it to try to keep people healthy and safe from it.

[Pam Bryant] Okay, well, I have a few questions, a few more questions for you, and so I can't remember everything --I decided to write them down. Before we talk about vaccines, I'm confused, along with everyone else --what are we calling this?

[Dr. Anne Schuchat] Right, we're calling this "2009 H1N1." We're trying to differentiate it from seasonal flu, or what you might think of as "the regular flu." Every year, there's about 200,000 people hospitalized from seasonal flu. And this year, we also have this new H1N1 virus in the mix, and so we're working hard to make sure that we can protect people against seasonal flu, but also against the H1N1 virus.

[Pam Bryant] Okay, and so when you say "seasonal flu," that's regular flu that some people get every year.

[Dr. Anne Schuchat] That's right. And those seasonal flu viruses change a little bit year to year, but not so much, and this new H1N1 virus is so different that we don't think the general population is protected against it. And we're taking extra steps to offer protection. We do a lot for seasonal flu. We offer flu vaccine each year. This year, we're making a special vaccine up, the H1N1 vaccine, that will be offered in addition to the seasonal flu. There'll probably be different recommendations, but I can tell you a little about them, if you want.

The H1N1 vaccine we're offering for five focused priority groups right now -- for pregnant women; for healthcare workers; for people who live with or care for babies under six months, because those babies can't get the vaccine themselves, we want their moms and dads and their caregivers to also get vaccinated; for children and young adults between six months of age and 24 years of age, and we want them to get vaccinated because a lot of them have been getting sick. They've been a big feature in the early disease that we've seen. And then we also recommend the vaccine for adults 25 through 64 years of age who have underlying chronic conditions, like diabetes and asthma, chronic heart disease or chronic lung disease, because those people have had worse complications from the influenza. They've had more hospitalizations and some have died.

[Pam Bryant] So how many doses would each person need to get?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] You know, with the usual seasonal flu vaccine or "regular flu" vaccine, most people just need one dose. But with the H1N1 vaccine, we think most people are going to need two doses. So, for starters, we're expecting everybody to get one dose and then three weeks later come back for a second dose.

[Pam Bryant] And should people expect to experience any side effects from having received two doses – one for regular flu and that first dose for H1N1 on the same day?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] You know, we're expecting that it's just fine to get both a seasonal flu vaccine and the H1N1 vaccine at the same visit. We're just expecting a shot in each arm, not - that that would be the way to go, so that that's the plan. Now, we also think the seasonal flu vaccine's going to be available sooner than the H1N1 vaccine, so you don't have to wait. We think it's a good idea to get that seasonal flu vaccine as soon as it's available near you, and then when the H1N1 vaccine becomes available, take advantage of that.

[Pam Bryant] Okay, well, I have two children -- I mentioned that I'm a mom -- and they both are vaccinated each year against the regular flu. And, of course, we're considering the H1N1 flu vaccine, as well.

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] It's great that your kids are getting the seasonal flu vaccine every year. We think that's terrific. And we do think getting the H1N1 vaccine will be important for them, too.

[Pam Bryant] Okay. I know there's a nasal spray for the regular flu vaccine. Will this same nasal spray be available for H1N1?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] Well, they're actually different ways of fighting off influenza. The shot is a killed virus, and the nasal spray is a weakened virus. But the really important thing is that neither the nasal spray nor the shot can give you flu. They can protect you against flu. A lot of people think that the flu vaccine gives you flu. It can't.

[Pam Bryant] So you've talked about vaccines and what's in them. But we're also hearing words like, "adjuvants." And just yesterday, someone asked me about Squalene. What are those?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] Squalene is an adjuvant. Adjuvants are put into vaccines to increase the immune system. We're not actually expecting to use adjuvants for the H1N1 influenza vaccines that we're making. We have bought adjuvant to have on the shelf. It's really an emergency provision or a contingency plan. If this virus mutates and becomes much, much different and more severe, we might need to add adjuvants in order to have an immune response that's effective. But for the time being, we really aren't expecting to use them. We're expecting to be using vaccines that are produced exactly the same as the seasonal influenza vaccines are, and they don't have adjuvants here in the United States.

[Pam Bryant] Well, with that in mind, is the new vaccine safe?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] It's really important to me, as a doctor and a public health expert, that our vaccine safety system is really strong. I can tell you what we're doing. We have a system that's out there for vaccines in general, but we're strengthening it for this H1N1 vaccine system. We want to make sure that if there are any problems associated with this vaccine, we find them quickly and we do something about them.

[Pam Bryant] And where can we get the vaccine?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] You know, in every state and city, it might be just a little bit different, and so the way that this vaccine distribution is going to work is that the public health departments in the state or the large city areas will be directing the program. We're expecting there to be school clinics where school-age children may be able to get the vaccine right at school after, you know, their parents sign a permission slip for that. We're also expecting the vaccine to be available in some doctors' offices and in some pharmacies and workplaces, as well as in some community center kinds of clinics. But the specifics are going to depend on where you live. So we think it's going to be important for the public health and the private health system to be in close communication and for everybody out there to stay tuned.

[Pam Bryant] You mentioned schools and school settings for vaccinations. Will this be required for entry into school or for kids to be able to stay in school?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] No, not at all. What we're offering is a voluntary vaccination program where we want to make sure people have access to vaccine and that vaccine's available for them, but we don't want this to be a mandatory program. So kids won't be kept out of school if they don't get the vaccine. We want parents to have good information so they can decide about the vaccine, and we want to make sure it's easy for them to get it for their kids.

[Pam Bryant] And again, these vaccines are being thoroughly tested...

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] That's right.

[Pam Bryant] ...on different populations or different types of people?

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] You know, there are a number of studies going on. They're being done around the country in a number of cities. There are some studies in other countries, as well. And they're being tested on a diverse group of people -- children and adults, pregnant women, men and women -- so we'll really get a lot of information from those. But it's really important for people to know that we've got a huge experience with the seasonal influenza vaccine. Every year, about 100 million people in the U.S. get that and we look at what happens with it. So I know that many people wonder, you know, "How bad is this flu, and what could the vaccine do to me?" Based on what I know today, I'm pretty concerned about this virus and what the influenza virus itself can do, and I'm feeling very comfortable with the safety information, but knowing that we're going to keep looking and that it's important that we do that.

[Pam Bryant] Thank you, Dr. Anne, for joining me today and answering many of the questions and concerns that people are having about the H1N1 flu and the H1N1 flu vaccine.

[Dr. Anne Shuchat] It's been my pleasure, Pam, and it's great to get to meet you.

[Pam Bryant] Yes, thank you. I hope this conversation has been helpful. And now that Dr. Anne knows me, I'd better make sure that I get my kids vaccinated so that they won't miss school and that I won't miss work. Thanks for watching. Dr. Anne, here are a couple of pictures of my kids.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.