



WHY GET A FLU SHOT?

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Every year, an epidemic of “flu” sweeps through the world usually starting in December and ending in March. Flu is actually an abbreviation for a group of viruses called influenza viruses that are distinguishable from the common cold in several ways. Firstly, their symptoms tend to be more severe- they come with higher fever, more body aches, and last longer. Secondly, they are extremely contagious. They are spread through the air with contact from an infected person’s coughing and sneezing. (An airplane is a “great” place to pick up the flu.) A typical cold is spread more through direct contact with infectious secretions. Thirdly, the flu causes more complications - it leads to more cases of secondary bacterial infections like ear infections and pneumonia. The flu can and does lead to many deaths every year, even in a small percentage of healthy people who contract the virus.

Certain population groups are more susceptible to severe flu than others. These include the elderly (over age 65), the very young (0-5 years old), pregnant women and people with chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes. Doctors and researchers agree the best way to treat the flu is to prevent it. The best way to prevent the flu is to get an annual flu shot.

A flu vaccine is made from the killed virus of several strains of flu that are thought to be the most likely to arrive that flu season. It is readily available in all *kupot cholim* and most do not require appointments for their administration. Side effects from the vaccine include mild local soreness at the injection site, and a sometimes a couple of days of cold like symptoms. Many people do not experience any side effects. Kids under age 8 who have not previously had two doses of flu vaccine at any time prior, require two doses administered one month apart, for full protection. There is a big push to vaccinate the high risk population, however, in recent years the recommendation has been that everyone no matter the age or risk category should be encouraged to get the vaccine. This is in order to reduce the amount of disease in the population at large. People who have high risk household contacts (anyone with a child under 5, a member of the family

with asthma, elderly grandparents they would like to visit over the next few months) should make it their business to get a flu shot. When a member of the family comes down with the flu the “attack rate” or likelihood that the household contacts will come down with the illness is as high as 80%. In order to protect every member of the household, everyone should get the shot. Babies can only get the vaccine starting at age six months. Therefore, the only way to protect the youngest babies is to give the pregnant mother the vaccine (some of the antibodies will be passed to the baby in-utero), and to make sure every member of the household gets the shot.

It is true that some years the vaccine is less effective and there are some cases of flu in vaccinated people. This should not be a reason not to get the shot. It may attenuate the illness so that it is not as severe, and though it is not a perfect system, we should still avail ourselves of every possible means of preventing the flu. It is also true that people who have had the flu in a particular season can still benefit from getting the vaccine since we know that several strains come through the community every year and a person can become sick with flu several times in a given season.

The only people who should not get the shot are those with severe egg allergy - to the point of anaphylaxis, and even they can be vaccinated in a safe medical setting. In general, any risk associated with the shot pales in comparison with the risk of contracting the flu and therefore the benefit of the shot, even in healthy people, clearly outweighs the risk. Every year we hear horrific stories of young mothers dying from flu, kids on respirators from severe flu associated pneumonias....Let’s make it our business to do the utmost to prevent these tragedies. When my patients ask me whether I believe in the flu shot I always tell them that I get the shot myself and give it to my husband and children. A stronger recommendation than that I cannot give you. *Dr. Tamar Rosner hails from Boro Park, New York and is a pediatrician in Leumit Health Services. She sees patients in the Leumit Tzeelim, Dolev and Nachala Menucha offices.*