

Your Child with Asthma Needs a Flu Shot!

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

[Janine Cory] As cold and flu season starts, parents are preparing for more sniffles, more children home from school sick, and more visits to the doctor. Although you can't prevent all of these illnesses, you can help prevent the flu and complications from flu infection. CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccination as the first and most important step in protecting yourself and your family against this serious, contagious illness.

Welcome to this CDC podcast. I'm Janine Cory, your host, and with me today is Dr. Theresa Harrington. She's a pediatrician and a public health researcher with CDC's National Center for Environmental Health. In recognition of National Influenza Vaccination Week—including, Children's Vaccination Day, she's joining us to discuss why it's important for children with asthma to get a flu vaccine every year.

[Janine Cory] Welcome to the show, Dr. Harrington.

[Dr. Harrington] Thank you for inviting me, Janine.

[Janine Cory] First, can you tell us a little bit about asthma?

[Dr. Harrington] Yes. Asthma is a chronic, often lifelong, illness that affects the airways and lungs and causes airway inflammation and asthma attacks. Signs and symptoms of an asthma attack may include coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath. Inhaled and oral medications are used to help prevent asthma attacks and to treat this illness.

[Janine Cory] What's important to know about children with asthma and the flu?

[Dr. Harrington] Well, almost seven million children, or nine percent of all children in the United States, have asthma. Studies show that children with asthma who caught the flu had about four times as many hospitalizations and twice as many outpatient visits as compared to children without asthma who caught the flu. Even though the flu vaccine is recommended for all people with asthma, recent estimates show that less than one in three children between the ages of 2 and 17 years who are diagnosed with asthma get the flu vaccine.

[Janine Cory] But are children with asthma more likely to catch the flu?

[Dr. Harrington] Well no, children with asthma do not appear to be more likely to catch the flu than children who don't have asthma.

[Janine Cory] Can you explain to us, how does the flu spread?

[Dr. Harrington] Well the influenza virus is spread from person-to-person, primarily through the air. And a person who has the flu, coughs or sneezes these virus-containing droplets into the air.

These infectious droplets can then be inhaled by others, thus passing along the infection. An uninfected person can also become infected with the flu by touching surfaces contaminated by flu viruses, then rubbing their eyes or nose, thus introducing the virus into their nasal passages. This is why covering a cough and proper hand washing are very important measures to help prevent further spread of the flu.

[Janine Cory] Sounds contagious.

[Dr. Harrington] Yes, it is.

[Janine Cory] So why is it so important for children with asthma, especially, to receive a flu vaccine?

[Dr. Harrington] Well, although children with asthma are just as likely as children who don't have asthma to catch the flu, children with asthma are *more* likely to have serious complications from the flu, such as asthma attacks or pneumonia. Also, children with asthma are more likely to be hospitalized for flu-related complications than children who don't have asthma. People with asthma have some degree of chronic inflammation of their airways, and this inflammation can be made much worse by infections of the upper or lower respiratory tract. Infection with the flu virus can trigger additional airway inflammation and an asthma attack.

[Janine Cory] At what age should children receive the flu vaccine?

[Dr. Harrington] CDC recommends that all children, beginning at six months of age, whether they have been diagnosed with asthma or not, get a flu vaccine every year. The vaccine is not approved for children younger than six months, but they are at high risk of developing influenza-related complications. So the best way to protect these infants is to vaccinate their household members and caregivers. In addition, the household contacts and caregivers of all children with asthma should get an annual flu vaccination.

[Janine Cory] I've heard there are different kinds of vaccines. What kind of flu vaccine should a child with asthma receive?

[Dr. Harrington] You're right Janine. There are two types of vaccines that protect against the flu. The flu shot is an inactivated vaccine containing killed virus that is injected with a needle, usually in the upper arm for older children and adults, or in the thigh muscle for infants. The flu shot is approved for use among people six months of age or older, including those with asthma. Any child who has a history of wheezing or reactive airways disease or a diagnosis of asthma should *only* receive the flu shot.

The second type of vaccine is the nasal-spray flu vaccine which contains attenuated, or weakened, live viruses. The nasal-spray flu vaccine is *not* recommended for use in children or adults with asthma. However, other people in the household who are healthy, aged 2 to 49 years, and not pregnant can get either a flu shot or the nasal-spray flu vaccine.

[Janine Cory] I've got it. Flu shots for kids with asthma.

[Dr. Harrington] Yes.

[Janine Cory] In addition to getting a flu vaccine, what other steps can be taken to prevent the spread of flu?

[Dr. Harrington] By far, the flu vaccine is *the* best protection against the flu, but there are everyday preventive actions people can take to stop the spread of germs. For example, remind your children to cover their coughs and sneezes to protect others—it's best to use a tissue and throw it away. They should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their face. Stay home from school or work if you or your child becomes ill so you don't spread germs to others. Generally, when children practice healthy habits, they miss fewer days of school.

[Janine Cory] But if children get the flu, is there medicine to treat it?

[Theresa Harrington] Well there are antiviral drugs that can be given to children one year of age and older that might help them get better sooner. These medications fight the flu by keeping flu viruses from multiplying in the body. These drugs *must* be prescribed by a doctor and are most effective when started during the first two days of illness. Treatment with influenza antiviral drugs could be particularly important for children at high risk of flu-related complications, including children of any age with asthma.

[Janine Cory] Dr. Harrington, if we got a flu vaccination last year, do we still need to get one this year?

[Dr. Harrington] Yes. Because flu viruses change every year, the vaccine is updated annually. So even if you or your children got a flu vaccine last year, you all still need to get one this season to be protected.

[Janine Cory] This is good information, but if I want to get more about the flu vaccine and learn about ways to prevent the flu among children with asthma, where should I go?

[Dr. Harrington] Listeners can go to the CDC Seasonal Flu website at www.cdc.gov/flu to get more information about the flu; this website also contains a flu guide for parents. To learn more about asthma, go to www.cdc.gov/asthma, that's a-s-t-h-m-a. If you can't afford to pay for the flu vaccine, free or reduced cost vaccines may be available; for more information contact your health department.

[Janine Cory] Dr. Harrington, this has been really informative, thank you so much for joining us today.

[Dr. Harrington] Thank you, Janine; it has been my pleasure.

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