



Highlights of [GAO-05-177T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Health and the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Influenza is associated with an average of 36,000 deaths and more than 200,000 hospitalizations each year in the United States. Persons who are aged 65 and older, people with chronic medical conditions, children younger than 2 years, and pregnant women are more likely to get severe complications from influenza than other people. The best way to prevent influenza is to be vaccinated each fall.

In early October 2004, one major manufacturer of flu vaccine for the United States announced that its facility's license had been temporarily suspended and it would not be releasing any vaccine for the 2004-2005 flu season. Because this manufacturer was expected to produce roughly one-half of the U.S. flu vaccine supply, the shortage resulting from its announcement has led to concern about the availability of flu vaccine, especially to those at high risk for flu-related complications.

GAO was asked to discuss issues related to the supply, demand, and distribution of vaccine for this flu season in the context of the current shortage. GAO based this testimony on products we have issued since May 2001, as well as work we conducted to update key information.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-177T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-177T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Janet Heinrich at (202) 512-7119.

## FLU VACCINE

### Recent Supply Shortages Underscore Ongoing Challenges

#### What GAO Found

The current vaccine shortage demonstrates the challenges to ensuring an adequate and timely flu vaccine supply. Only three manufacturers produce flu vaccine for the U.S. market, and the potential for future manufacturing problems such as those experienced both this year and to a lesser degree in previous years is still present. When shortages occur, their effect can be exacerbated by the existing distribution system. Under this system, health providers and vaccine distributors generally order a particular manufacturer's vaccine and have limited recourse, even for meeting the needs of high-risk persons, if that manufacturer's production is adversely affected. By contrast, providers who purchased vaccine from a different manufacturer might receive more of their order and be able to vaccinate their high-risk patients.

The current situation also reflects another concern: the nation lacks a systematic approach for ensuring that seniors and others at high risk for flu-related complications receive flu vaccine when it is in short supply. Once this year's shortage became apparent, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) took a number of steps to influence distribution patterns to help providers get some vaccine for their high-risk patients. These steps are still playing themselves out, and it will take more time to assess how well they will work. Problems have not been totally averted, however, as there have been media reports of long lines to obtain limited doses of vaccine and of high-risk individuals unable to find a flu vaccination in a timely fashion.

We shared the facts contained in this statement with CDC officials. They informed us they had no comments.