

Doctors warn about upcoming flu season

Experts are predicting a moderate 1996-97 influenza season, but people most at risk for life-threatening flu complications should still get vaccinated—and the sooner the better.

"The elderly and people with chronic underlying health problems should get vaccinated every flu season," said Dr. W. Paul Glezen, epidemiologist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Influenza B will likely be the dominant strain this season, Glezen said, but there could also be an appearance by A/Wuhan (H3N2), a new variant.

Glezen advises people in the high-risk groups to get inoculated as soon as the vaccine becomes available, usually in early autumn.

In North America, flu season usually begins in earnest after Thanksgiving, but, as happened in 1991, it can come earlier. "If it hits early, the elderly and people with chronic underlying health problems need to be protected," Glezen said.

Every year thousands of people, most of them elderly, die from pneumonia resulting from influenza, he said, and many, perhaps most, of the deaths could have been prevented by vaccination.

Among the people at high risk for possibly deadly flu complications: people with heart disease; lung disease; including asthma and chronic bronchitis; diabetes, chronic kidney disease; chronic anemia, including sickle-cell disease; and immune-system disorders.

Influenza usually strikes suddenly and produces fever, generalized muscle pain, severe weakness and fatigue, a sore throat and a dry, hacking cough.

To reduce fever and pain, adults may take aspirin or aspirin substitutes; children should take acetaminophen, if needed, said Glezen, a pediatrician. All flu victims should get plenty of bed rest and liquids.

The vaccine is about 85 percent effective in helping people avoid influenza, he said.

Some people worry that they will get the flu from the vaccine, but that is not possible, Glezen said, because the vaccine is made from killed virus.

The vaccine has been shown to significantly lower the risk of hospitalization for influenza and pneumonia in people 65 and older.

NEWS BRIEFS

Parents can help improve children's grades

The first report cards of the new school year are just around the corner. If grades need some work, parental support can make a difference.

"Providing structure and expressing interest may be the keys to improving a child's grades," said Dr. Lou Ann Todd Mock, a psychologist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

The first step: talk with the teacher and begin to implement changes at home.

One essential is adequate study space with good lighting and few distractions.

Mock also encourages parents to set a specific study time.

"Allow time for outside play or an after-school snack, but make television off limits until after homework time," she said.

It might be necessary to sit with a young child just starting a homework routine, but pull back as soon as possible so children can learn to work independently.

Future flu vaccines could be better

Influenza vaccines of the future could be more effective and longer lasting.

Researchers are working on flu vaccines that, like the successful polio vaccine, are made from weakened live viruses.

"The hope is that live attenuated, or weakened, flu vaccines will provide immunity

to a wider variety of flu strains," said Dr. Wendy Keitel of the Vaccine and Treatment Evaluation Unit at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine. "There is also the possibility that such vaccines might provide protection that lasts longer than one season."

Tests with live attenuated vaccines at Baylor and other sites point to their being at least as effective as killed-virus vaccines.

Tips for breast-feeding mothers

Stockpiling breast milk can help nursing mothers on the go.

"Just remember to take a few precautions when storing human milk," said Dr. Judy Hopkinson, a lactation expert at the USDA's Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

First, thoroughly wash hands with soap and water.

Express the milk into a clean container. Glass or hard plastic bottles are best, but plastic baggie bottles are okay for occasional home use, Hopkinson said. Bottles should contain a single serving.

Label and date bottles, and be sure they are airtight.

To reduce accidental contamination, only open a bottle when it is to be fed to the infant.

Signs of

Alzheimer's disease

Knowing the signs of Alzheimer's disease can help family members and friends know if a loved one needs care.

Repetitiveness can be an early sign of the disease's onset, said Dr. Rachele Doody, clinical director of the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Other early signs include difficulty remembering recent information, losing track of time and frequent forgetfulness and disorientation.

Alzheimer's, a progressive loss of memory and other thinking abilities, is a degenerative disease of the brain's nerve cells. It generally affects persons older than 60, but it can begin as early as the 40s.

Sleep patterns in infants

There are significant differences between the sleep

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Procedure aids patients with Parkinson's disease

An electrode implanted in the brain allows doctors and patients to 'turn off' Parkinson's disease tremors.

"The procedure, deep brain stimulation, is still in the research

phase in the United States," said Dr. Richard Simpson, associate professor of neurosurgery at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

The technique has been

successful in Europe for several years and is currently being tested at Baylor and five other U. S. medical centers.

"During surgery, we implant an electrode into the deep portion of the brain called the thalamus," Simpson said. "This area controls motor signals from the brain to the muscles."

Doctors calculate the precise target before surgery by using a CT scan, or layered X-ray, of the brain.

"The electrode is connected to a transmitter. Once the electrode is placed, we test it at different frequencies to see what setting will stop the tremors," he

said.

Researchers believe the high frequency stimulus generated by the electrode jams the brain impulses generating the tremor.

During surgery, the patient is awake under local anesthesia, so that doctors can test the device with the tremors at their normal level. The results are dramatic, Simpson says, with tremors stopping while the current is on and starting once the current is off.

"The electrode remains in the brain, and the transmitter is implanted, much like a pacemaker, above the breast," Simpson said. "Connecting wires

run under the skin in the scalp and neck."

Patients can turn the transmitter on and off by placing a magnet over the implanted device. Simpson recommends shutting the device off during sleep to conserve the batteries which are estimated to last four to five years. "Battery replacement can be done as outpatient surgery," he said.

"Since this is a new procedure, we don't have data to show how long the effects will last," Simpson said. "The frequency is adjustable, so the setting could be changed if the tremors returned."

The best candidates for this procedure are Parkinson's patients in good overall health that have tremors as their main problem and patients with essential tremors.

Patients chosen are those who do not respond to medications.

"Overall, our patients have been quite happy with the results," Simpson said.

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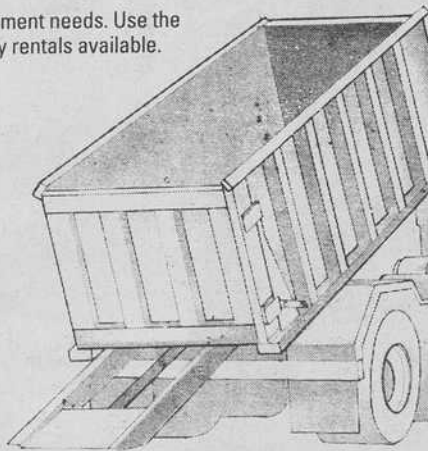
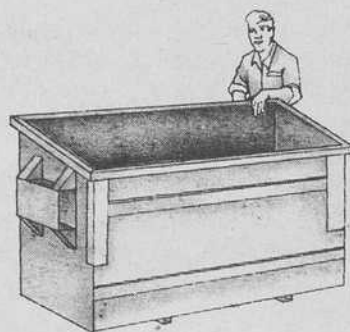
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