



U.S. FACES FLU VACCINE SHORTAGE

October 11, 2004

Unlike last year when health officials urged more people to get flu vaccines, authorities are asking the public to save the supplies for those most at risk after half of the nation's anticipated supply of vaccine became unavailable last week.

Last year a record 87 million Americans were vaccinated against the flu, but this year there will be less than 54 million flu shots available due to a problem at a British factory.

A contagious viral illness marked by high fevers and respiratory symptoms, the flu kills an estimated 36,000 Americans each year. More than 200,000 people are hospitalized each year due to flu complications, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For several decades, the flu vaccine has helped people who came in contact with the virus avoid getting sick. This year's flu season is expected to peak between December and February.

Vaccine shortage surprises U.S. officials

The shortage became public when Chiron Corp., one of two companies that supplies flu vaccine to the American market, announced that the British government suspended the manufacturing license at its major factory in Liverpool, England for three months, citing contamination problems.

“This is very disappointing news that creates a serious challenge to our vaccine supply for the upcoming season,” Tommy Thompson, secretary of health and human services, said at an Oct. 5 news conference. “Our immediate focus will be on making sure the supply of vaccines we do have reaches those who are most vulnerable,” he added.

Health officials are asking that only those persons at the most risk get the vaccine. They include adults 65 and older, infants 6-23 months, people who care for infants younger than 6 months, women who are pregnant during flu season, persons with underlying health conditions and health care workers involved in direct patient care.

What happened?

The shortage was not altogether unanticipated. In late August American-owned Chiron said it would delay shipments of its vaccine because a small number of batches were contaminated.

But the complete shutdown of the factory was unexpected, according to company officials and U.S. federal health officials.

“We anticipated the loss of 6 to 8 million doses. We did not anticipate the license would be suspended,” Thompson said.

On Oct. 7 an anonymous spokesman for the British regulatory agency said that the vaccines were contaminated with the bacteria *serratia*, the Associated Press reported.

Serratia is commonly found in the environment and although it does not usually harm healthy people, it can cause problems when injected.

Why shortages occur

Each year scientists try to anticipate the strains of the flu virus for the coming season and make the appropriate vaccine. They have to make this decision months in advance because of current technology limitations. The viruses that are killed to make the flu vaccine are grown in millions of eggs, which takes a long time.

Companies are trying to develop ways to make vaccines in cell cultures, which would speed up the process, but the technology isn't there yet.

Manufacturers try not to make too much vaccine because what is not used has to be destroyed.

In addition, few companies make vaccines because they are not very profitable, a problem according to many health experts.

“You cannot have a vital function like vaccine production limited to the manufacturing capacity of two companies. It leaves no room for failure,” Dr. Irwin Redlener, associate dean of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, told the New York Times.

Many experts in the health industry say that government and private companies need to work together to increase vaccine production.

“We have to realize that the era of dirt cheap vaccines is over,” Dr. William Schaffner, chairman of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine and a member of a government advisory panel on vaccination, told the New York Times.

“We have to be willing to pay more for the wonderful protection we get from vaccines. When there is more profit, it will be an incentive for companies to enter the market,” he added.

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