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Beyond Prevention: Examining the Lesser-Known Benefits of Flu Vaccination

### Announcer:

You're listening to *VacciNation* on ReachMD, and this episode is sponsored by CSL Seqirus. Here's your host, Dr. Charles Turck.

### Dr. Turck:

Welcome to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Charles Turck, and joining me today to discuss the lesser-known benefits of flu vaccination is Dr. Darvin Scott Smith, who's an infectious disease consultant at San Mateo Medical Center in California. Dr. Smith, it's great to have you with us here today.

### Dr. Smith:

Thank you, Dr. Turck.

### Dr. Turck:

So to get us started, Dr. Smith, we all know that vaccines play a crucial role in preventing the flu itself, but should a patient get sick, how could their vaccination status impact severity if illness?

### Dr. Smith:

Well, flu vaccines are primarily designed to prevent infection. It also plays a crucial role in mitigating the severity of the illness. So if you do contract flu, the severity is diminished if you have the flu vaccine. So here's how it works. It reduces the severity of the symptoms so even if you get sick after being vaccinated, the symptoms are often milder. And this means that it might be a shorter duration of the illness, less severe, and with fewer complications. So with lower risk of complications, vaccination significantly reduces the chances of developing serious flu-related complications, like pneumonia, bronchitis, and worsening other underlying health conditions. This is, in particular, important for the protection of vulnerable populations, so those at high risk for severe flu, like very young children, pregnant women, older adults, and those with chronic conditions.

### Dr. Turck:

So on that with reference to the high-risk patient populations, would you tell us about the impact vaccination has on hospitalization rates, particularly for those patients?

### Dr. Smith:

Sure. Hospitalizations are much reduced in a population that is well-vaccinated. And we know this from many studies that look at diminution of hospitalization rates because of flu shots. And the breakdown of the impact is studies consistently show that influenza vaccination leads to substantial decrease in hospitalizations due to flu-related illnesses. And the protection of high-risk, again, is most noted in older adults, young children, pregnant women, and people with chronic health conditions, like asthma, heart disease, diabetes, and immunosuppression due to cancers and chemotherapy and so on.

### Dr. Turck:

Now if we look at other illnesses, how does vaccination reduce the risk of co-infections, such as bacterial pneumonia, in patients who contract the flu?

### Dr. Smith:

Yeah, influenza vaccinations significantly reduce the risk of co-infections like bacterial pneumonia, and here's how that works. So with a weakened immune system, the flu virus itself can weaken the body's immune system, making it more susceptible to secondary

infections like bacterial pneumonia. And with the flu vaccine, that severity of the illness is reduced, and this mitigates the severity of the entire illness. If somebody is hospitalized, it could be of shorter duration or maybe they don't need to be intubated because they've had the flu vaccination. So it really helps maintain a stronger immune response and makes it less likely for secondary infections to take hold. And that shortened duration of illness also is a big mitigating factor, especially in avoiding these complications such as the bacterial colonization in the respiratory tract that reduces the risk of pneumonia.

**Dr. Turck:**

And how about chronic diseases like diabetes, pulmonary, and cardiovascular conditions? In what ways does flu vaccination have an impact on them and play a role in their management?

**Dr. Smith:**

Well similarly, these chronic diseases can tip somebody who has influenza into a worse state of health. So for example, somebody with congestive heart failure who doesn't get the flu shot might tend to have a higher heart rate and go into more heart failure because they're experiencing more desaturation or difficulties with oxygenation. And then so they are at a loss because of lack of immune response to the flu that's affecting their underlying disease. Similarly, you can imagine with asthma or some of these other suppressing diseases. For example, somebody getting chemotherapy, all of those things might make one more susceptible, but the flu vaccine would increase the chances that they can survive that.

**Dr. Turck:**

For those just tuning in, you're listening to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Charles Turck, and I'm speaking with, Dr. Darvin Scott Smith about the benefits of flu vaccination.

Now, Dr. Smith, clearly there are a lot of patient-specific benefits, but how does vaccination have an impact at the macro-level on the overall healthcare system, particularly in terms of resource allocation and reducing the burden on healthcare facilities during the flu season?

**Dr. Smith:**

That is a super important question. We often think of vaccination as something that's going to help ourselves individually, and that does measurably occur. But I think it's really important to note that when people get vaccinated against the flu, you're not only helping yourself, but you're helping your immediate family, the community around you, and public health on a larger scale. And how does that work? Well, it reduces hospitalization overall, prevents severe flu cases, and the vaccination lowers the number of patients requiring hospitalizations. So that frees up critical care resources, and it also decreases emergency department visits, we know that. It lowers staff absenteeism, not only in the healthcare setting, but also in work settings in general. And many studies have shown that it improves attendance at work because people are not leaving work due to flu-like illnesses or the exacerbations from their other disease. So in summary, that mitigates economic impact and, overall, the economic burden on the healthcare system due to that influenza is much reduced in a vaccinated population.

**Dr. Turck:**

So given everything we've discussed today, Dr. Smith, do you have any final thoughts on how we can best communicate all these benefits to our patients?

**Dr. Smith:**

Yes. I think it's super important that we communicate clearly. As healthcare providers, our wish is that every individual gets vaccinated to begin with because they're really helping not only themselves, but the community at large if they get a flu shot. So ensuring our patients have access to and get the vaccine is critical.

**Dr. Turck:**

Such important comments for us to consider as we come to the end of today's program. And I want to thank my guest, Dr. Darvin Scott Smith, for joining me to discuss the lesser-known benefits of flu vaccination. Dr. Smith, it was a pleasure speaking with you today.

**Dr. Smith:**

Thank you, Dr. Turck. Pleasure to be here.

**Announcer:**

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