

Transcript Details

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Flu Season Readiness: Strategies for Timely and Annual Vaccinations

Announcer Introduction

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

Dr. Turck:

This is *VacciNation* on ReachMD, and I'm Dr. Charles Turck. Here with me today to discuss strategies for timely flu vaccination is Dr. Jill Foster, who's a Professor in the Department of Pediatrics and the Director of the Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at the University of Minnesota Medical School in Minneapolis. Dr. Foster, welcome to the program.

Dr. Foster:

Thank you.

Dr. Turck:

So jumping right in, Dr. Foster, when does the peak of the flu season typically hit? And based on that, when's the best time for patients to receive a flu shot?

Dr. Foster:

So the peak usually is in mid-winter. The flu usually isn't around until about November. It really starts kicking up in November, December, and then after the holidays, the first of the year, that's when it really starts peaking. So it's really important to make sure that you get the vaccine before then. If you haven't gotten it, you shouldn't say, "Oh, the flu season's halfway through. I don't want to get my vaccine." It's never too late to get the vaccine as long as it's still flu season. But the optimal times are really to be thinking about it in August, but the peak times to get it are September and October.

Dr. Turck:

And why is it so important for patients to get timely and annual flu vaccines?

Dr. Foster:

Well, it's important to protect them, but it's also important to protect your family. For instance, a newborn baby doesn't have much protection—only protection that came from the mom—and also elderly people may not have a good response to the flu vaccine. So you want to protect yourself. You want to not miss time from work and have all the misery of the flu, but also you want to protect your vulnerable family members. It's important every year because the strains that are around every year has changed slightly. So experts meet, make a prediction of which strains to put in the vaccine, and then the vaccine is formulated so that every fall, we have a vaccine that is really expected to match what is circulating.

Dr. Turck:

Now despite that importance, vaccination rates have been declining since the pandemic. In fact, the CDC estimates that during the 2022-2023 flu season, only 47 percent of adults and 57 percent of children got vaccinated. So what are your thoughts about that, including how much of a risk it poses to patients?

Dr. Foster:

Yes, I am very concerned about that. We'd had a slow decline in vaccine uptake even before the pandemic, but since the pandemic, it has dropped considerably and is really putting people at risk, just like I said, for individuals and for families who aren't vaccinated. I just saw a mom this morning in the clinic who had five children, and she'd managed to get the flu vaccine for herself—I guess probably while the children were at school—but none of the children had been vaccinated and now had the flu and were being seen in our clinic for late problems from that. I think it's multifactorial. Like this mom, people are busy, lives are complicated, and it's harder to get a doctor's visit because doctors' offices are a lot busier since the pandemic. But I think even underlying the logistic issues is people not having as much trust in vaccines as they did. There was a lot of trust eroded over vaccines with a lot of the controversy that was just created over the COVID vaccine. The vaccine has proven to be very effective and very safe, and yet there's all sorts of stories and rumors out there about vaccines not being safe or not being necessary, and that has eroded people's belief. And so people are either not going to seek out the vaccine or are actually going to avoid the vaccine.

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. Jill Foster about the importance of timely flu vaccinations.

So understanding the risks associated with the declining vaccination rates, let's turn our attention to strategies that can help improve those rates. Dr. Foster, what are some other common reasons patients are hesitant to receive a flu vaccine and how do you address those concerns?

Dr. Foster:

So I think that if we talk about the 'not prioritizing it' issue, I think that there's lots of things doctors' offices can do about, and it should be that every season is flu season. It shouldn't be that people wait until August, September, or October to be thinking about it. Offices need to provide a vaccine-positive, vaccine-friendly environment where people can ask questions, and there can be lots of opportunities to anticipate what's coming down on the road and plan for that. So that's one strategy. The other strategy is to really make it be known that you want to talk to people because people have questions. There's no such thing as a stupid question coming from people. People that read something or are just thinking something should be able to feel free to talk with their provider about their concerns about it. And providers are needing to be able to create some space for that in the office visit. I know it's really hard and there's a lot of priorities, but making space for this is really important.

Dr. Turck:

And are there any other ways we can optimize patient outreach and education on the benefits of getting vaccinated before peak flu season?

Dr. Foster:

Yeah, there's lots of things you can do to try to automate the process. You can optimize your EMR to make sure that it provides prompts. They'll let you know exactly people's status. You can go over people's status automatically as part of your visit. Have somebody else in the office even rather than the actual provider or the people up front or the person putting the patient in a room say like, "Let's go over what vaccines you have and what vaccines you're going to be needing in the next interim so we can plan for it." Use the registries. Sometimes people can transfer from one office to another, a different EMR, so you won't have the records. Most states have registries, so you can very easily create systems in your office that you can just pull that up quickly and find out somebody's vaccine status. Try to create as much as you can so that things just kind of happen automatically. So you don't have to always be keeping this mental checklist of, "Oh yeah, I forgot to put vaccines in today into our visit."

Dr. Turck:

And lastly, Dr. Foster, do you have any other final thoughts, key takeaways, or any other best practices we can implement to ensure our patients receive timely vaccinations?

Dr. Foster:

I think a lot of it is just a mindset. It's a mindset of being pro-vaccine and encouraging your patients to be pro-vaccine. I think some folks are going to be willing to go sort of one way or another, and it's just about creating that environment that with small things of artwork, posters, and things like that, you talk about vaccines being a good thing.

Dr. Turck:

Sound strategies for us to consider as we come to the end of today's program. And I want to thank my guest, Dr. Jill Foster, for joining

me to discuss how we can promote timely flu vaccinations for our patients. Dr. Foster, it was great having you on the program.

Dr. Foster:

Thank you for having me.

Announcer Close

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