Chapter Medical Advisory Committee Article

Flu Shot and IBD

Summertime is now a fond memory. Sweaters are coming out of storage, the sunscreen is going to the bottom of the drawer, the kids are back in school and thinking about your Halloween costume is now unavoidable. Fortunately, we do all have one yearly opportunity to look forward to, Flu Shots! That’s right, for Crohn’s and colitis patients, October is when the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends we do our part to prevent fevers, days lost from work and even mortality by getting a flu shot.

The flu shot, or the “inactivated intramuscular influenza vaccine” is given every year starting now in order to prevent getting the flu. It is important for preventing both the pesky febrile illness, and it’s complications that can be disastrous for some of our most susceptible patients. Every year, about 10% of us end up getting the flu and that number can be often cut to less than 3% if we are vaccinated against influenza. The complications of the flu can include pneumonia, blood infections and death. These complications most commonly occur in the very young and the very old but may also occur in those whose immune systems have been weakened by Crohn’s disease or Ulcerative Colitis or the medicines that are used to treat them.

Most health organizations recommend vaccinations for all patients with IBD. It is particularly important for those patients who are taking medications that suppress the immune system to receive medications. These include any of the injectable or infusion medicines such as remicaide, humira, cimzia or methotrexate as well as tablets such as prednisone, imuran, azathioprine, 6MP and purinethol. Asacol and other mesalamine (or 5ASA) medications or budesonide generally do not suppress the immune system. Additionally, close contacts of IBD patients should be immunized to keep the virus as far out of the zip code as possible.

One of the most important considerations when receiving the vaccination is to recognize that two different vaccines are available. The flu shot (inactivated vaccine) and an intra-nasally inhaled spray (live attenuated) are both available. Crohn’s and colitis patients who are taking any of the potent immunosuppressive medicines (Remicade, Humira, Cimzia) or the immunomodulator medicines (Methotrexate, 6MP) should not receive intranasal spray. Furthermore, those who are close in contact with these individuals should also not receive the intranasal spray. Alternatively, these patients should receive the flu shot (inactivated vaccine). The intra-nasal vaccine has live virus within it that can be dangerous for people with diminished immune systems.

Also, keep in mind that just because you got the flu shot last year does not mean you are protected this year. Each year, makers of flu vaccine predict which strains are going to be active by monitoring flu activity around the world. Get injected every year! There is some evidence that those who receive the vaccine every year have even better protection than those who just receive it sporadically.

The flu shot is well tolerated by people who receive the injection. The most common side effect is soreness at the injection spot. Rarely, you may feel feverish and run down for the day after you receive the shot because your bodies immune system is reacting to the inactive virus particles that were delivered to you and building up the protective antibodies that will keep you from getting the flu this winter. You absolutely should NOT get the flu shot if you have had an anaphylactic reaction to eggs because the flu is made using standard chicken eggs.

Jeremy Herman, M.D.
Cedars-Sinai Medical Group
If you have a more mild egg allergy, consult your doctor to consider whether the flu shot is right for you. Other reasons to avoid getting the flu shot are if you currently have a fever or have had a rare bad reaction to it in the past such as Gullian Barre syndrome or Bells Palsy (both reversible conditions that can cause muscle weakness). It is fine to get the flu shot if you have are just having a cold without a fever.

Even if you do get a flu shot this winter, it is important to follow common sense hygiene practices to avoid the spread of the flu. The flu shot is not always 100% effective because the prediction of important flu strains made by the manufacturer may not always be correct. Particularly if you are taking a medicine that suppresses your immune system, avoiding people who are ill, not going to work or school when you have a fever and hand washing are all proven practices that prevent the airborne spread of flu. And remember! No advice is better then personally discussing your particular situation with your doctor. Don't hesitate to ask if the flu shot is right for you today.

Jeremy Herman, M.D.
Cedars-Sinai Medical Group