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COMMENT

Will we ever get a flu cure?

**TAKE PRECAUTIONS:** We are at least a decade away from a cure for the flu... so immunisation continues to be our best defence

IN a laboratory in Canada, scientists are working on the holy grail of vaccines; a jab that if created could potentially immunise its recipient against multiple strains of flu for several years, if not a lifetime.

The idea behind the tests is that if a vaccine can be developed that targets the static part of the flu virus; i.e. that part that does not change, it does not matter how many times or to what extent the active part of the virus mutates. The reason that flu is so difficult to treat is not only because the active part rapidly alters, but because there are several flu strains, it would be impossible to develop one vaccine to target all of these. Unfortunately, a universal flu vaccine may still be ten years away.

Flu is caused by the influenza virus, which inhabits the throat and lungs of those affected. It is an air-borne bug, spread by coughing and sneezing, and even by touching surfaces upon which the virus has landed.

There is a common misconception that flu is not a serious illness and because it is a virus and hence cannot be treated with antibiotics, it is simply a case of getting on with it. Indeed the phrase "man-flu" was famously coined to represent a particularly heavy cold that debilitated men, while similarly affected women just carried on as normal.

Flu is, of course, a virus, and should cause no real problems in persons who are otherwise fit and well. Typical symptoms are those associated with any viral illness, and include fever, chills, headache and ache of joints and muscles. Thankfully these are in general short lived, lasting up to seven days, after which the individual should experience full recovery.

However, in a small group of people, flu can result in hospitalisation, disability and even death. In susceptible persons, flu may lead to illness ranging from bronchitis through to pneumonia. Rarer complications include tonsillitis and even meningitis. The complete list of people who are more likely to suffer these complications is fairly exhaustive, but broadly includes those with pre-existing diseases of the heart, lungs or



Despite millions of pounds and years of research we are still at least a decade away from a flu vaccine. North-East GP **Zak Uddin** says until then the best we can do is take sensible precautions

kidneys as well as those with neurological conditions, for example multiple sclerosis. In addition, those who are likely to have a greater exposure to flu, including front line health care workers, as well as carers for the elderly or infirm, are advised to consider the vaccine. The rationale behind this is that although these workers may still get a flu-like illness, it will generally be milder and shorter-lived than if they had not had the vaccine, hence resulting in less time off work.

UNLIKE many other medications, the flu vaccine is encouraged for pregnant women at any stage in the pregnancy, for several reasons. Pregnant women are more likely than non-pregnant women to get pneumonia following the flu, and this may result in premature labour, with all its associated risks to mother and baby. The vaccine passes from mother to child, and hence confers a degree of immunity to the new born, when it is still too young to have the vaccine itself.

NHS England has currently made the vaccine eligible to four million children this year, over half a million more than last year.

The vaccine is in the form of a nasal spray and hence unlike the injection, is completely painless. It is felt that although children may have good immune systems, if they do get the virus, it usually spreads round the whole family.

There are very few contraindications to having the flu vaccine; these being a severe allergy to the vaccine, or being actively unwell. In addition, gelatin from pigs is used in the manufacture of the nasal vaccine, and certain religious groups may object to this.

In summary, the flu vaccine is an excellent immunisation, which is suitable for the majority of people and available in the UK without cost. It benefits individuals as well as communities, as greater levels of vaccination will reduce the likelihood of transmission. Although it does not completely protect against getting flu, any symptoms tend to be less severe and for a shorter amount of time than if not vaccinated. Sadly as the virus does mutate so rapidly, you do need to have a fresh vaccine every year. If you are still in doubt, or would like more advice, your local GP or practice nurse is often the best person to turn to for advice and reassurance.

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Dr Zak Uddin

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QUALITY

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