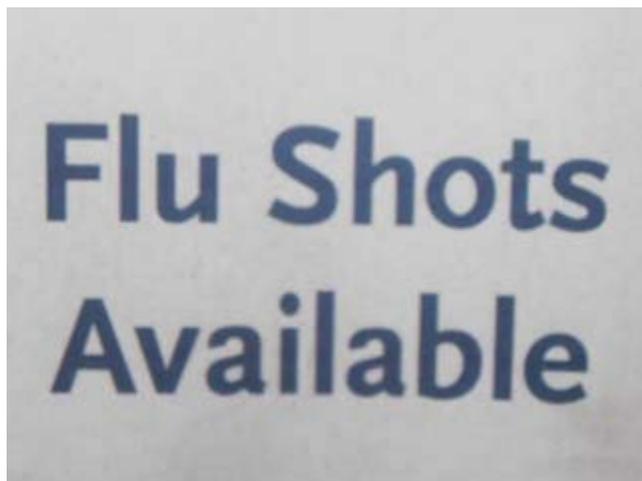


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## Fall flu season getting an early start

Don Ames Reporting

The Centers for Disease Control is tracking flu cases that have started to emerge, mostly in the Southeast and central Southwest.

That's a little early for our area.

"Usually, our influenza season seems to start with Thanksgiving," says Dr. Brobson Lutz, with the Orleans Parish Medical Society.

"We get a little increase in influenza around Thanksgiving when students from up north come back for the holiday. But, typically, our cases really start in late December or January."

Still, he says now is the time to get that flu shot.

"You need two to three weeks for that anti-body to build up," says Lutz.

He says it's a good idea to get the influenza vaccine annually.

"It's usually a little bit different every year. So, if you get it every year, that's just like putting money into your immunological bank."

Flu strains that circulated in the Southern Hemisphere influenced the contents of the U.S. vaccine, which includes the 2009 H1N1 plus new variants of Influenza A and Influenza B which haven't been seen recently.

Lutz says that's where that 'immunological bank comes into play.

It's possible that a flu shot taken in 2009 may still provide some protection from the H1N1 strain from that year that's expected to return this season.

"If a new strain comes in, it may be similar to that and may actually help you. It may not actually prevent the flu, but it can attenuate or make the flu not as bad as it usually is," says Lutz.

There are very few reasons to skip the flu vaccine, and fear that the shot might hurt really shouldn't be one of them this year.

The new vaccination is a lot less intimidating for folks with a fear of needles.

"There's been some work on the needle and patients are all pleasantly surprised about the new style," Lutz says.

The new intradermal vaccination has a 90 percent smaller needle.

The vaccine goes just under the skin instead of into the muscle and makes the injection hurt less at the time, though there may be pain later. Side effects may include swelling, redness, and irritation.

There's some fear that folks aren't going to take this year's flu season seriously because last year's was so mild.

But some predict this season is going to be much worse than last year, due to the reemergence of strains that haven't appeared recently.

And, for those who believe that you can catch the flu by getting the shot, Lutz says that's a myth.

Your body may feel like it's coming down with the flu, but that is actually your immune system adjusting to the antigen. Those symptoms should go away within three to seven days.

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