Signs point to a worse flu season. Vaccination’s the answer.

OCT 26, 2021

Jennifer Lubell
Contributing News Writer

There are strong reasons to anticipate a bad flu season this year. A decline in COVID-19 mitigation measures, the rise of the highly transmissible SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant, and limited exposure to influenza last year add up to a worrying combination of risk factors, according to Willie Underwood III, MD, MSc, MPH, a member of the AMA Board of Trustees.

The AMA, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Ad Council, has launched a campaign to prevent influenza illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths this flu season by reaching out to high-risk groups of patients least likely to get vaccinated. In an interview on a recent episode of “AMA Moving Medicine,” Dr. Underwood talked about the #NoTimeForFlu campaign and what physicians can do to prevent illness.

“Let’s not get sick”

At least 45 million people get sick with the flu annually, and more than 700,000 people end up in the hospital. No one has time for that, especially now with COVID-19, said Dr. Underwood, a board-certified urologist.

“We’re trying to push the economy forward. Everyone has all these other concerns that are going on,” he said. “Let’s not get sick.”

Dr. Underwood directed patients and physicians to the public health campaign’s website, GetMyFluShot.org, for more information. The website also is available in Spanish at VacunateContraLaInfluenza.org.
Reaching the undecided

The #NoTimeForFlu campaign aims to engage patients at the greatest need or risk of illness or death from the flu, specifically African Americans and Latinos, said Dr. Underwood, who’s the executive director of the Buffalo Center for Health Equity, in New York.

“Black and Hispanic people remain a key focus of the campaign due to long-standing health care inequities that have created undue burden and barriers in their communities,” said Leandris Liburd, PhD, MPH, MA, who directs the CDC’s Office of Minority Health and Health Equity. A recent Ad Council survey found that 30% of Black and 33% of Hispanic respondents hadn’t made up their minds about getting a flu shot this season.

Read about the AMA’s strategic plan to embed racial justice and advance health equity.

Flu shot first, then trick or treat

“Get vaccinated” is the top-line message physicians need to be communicating to patients this year, said Dr. Underwood. Unless there’s a medical contraindication, anyone six months and older can get the flu vaccination.

It’s the best way for patients to protect themselves, the people they love and those most likely to get sick in the hospital or die, such as infants, young children and the elderly, he stressed.

“We’re encouraging everyone to get vaccinated before the end of October” or ASAP this flu season, said Dr. Underwood.

Defend against two viruses at once

If a patient comes in for a flu vaccine and they haven’t been vaccinated for COVID-19, this is an opportunity to coadminister the vaccines, said Dr. Underwood.

“I know people heard initially when the COVID vaccines came out that you should only give the COVID vaccine by itself and don’t combine it with other things. … Now we know that there are safety studies to show that they could be given together.”

GetMyFluShot.org addresses common questions about COVID-19 and flu vaccines, such as the
differences between the two types of vaccines and the safety of getting them together.

Learn more with the AMA about the coadministration of flu and COVID-19 vaccines.

#NoTimeForFlu is running in tandem with the #FluFOMO hashtag, which highlights the “fear of missing out” on activities people would have to skip if they got sick.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.