Breaking Down the Flu Vaccine’s Effectiveness

After last year’s flu vaccine missed the mark, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predicted that this year’s vaccine should offer more protection. And so far, they’ve been right.

Health officials recently reported that this year’s flu season has been mild, and the vaccine has been more effective. The CDC’s preliminary figures show the overall effectiveness of the 2015 annual vaccine is 59 percent, making it the second most effective annual flu vaccine since records began a decade ago.

Each year, the flu vaccine varies in effectiveness because strains of the virus mutate. To combat the virus, a new vaccine is developed annually to match the strains that are predicted to thrive, but developing the vaccine is a lengthy process. Because strains of the virus can change, predicting which strain will dominate is challenging. As a result, protection garnered from the vaccine can fluctuate. Over the past decade, CDC records report levels of effectiveness as low as 10 percent and as high as 60 percent.

While efficacy varies, the annual flu vaccine is still the best preventive method to avoid and reduce severity of the flu. The CDC recommends the annual vaccine for everyone aged six months and older, as well as the high-dose flu vaccine for seniors above the age of 65.

Despite these recommendations, only half of all Americans get the flu vaccine each year. According to CDC estimates, by the end of this flu season, only 44 percent of adults and 59 percent of children will have received a flu shot. Many individuals hold the misguided belief that because vaccine effectiveness varies, the vaccine is not necessary. In fact, a national poll by C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital found that 35 percent of parents surveyed felt the flu vaccine was less important than other childhood vaccines, which isn’t true.

Contracting the flu can be just as dangerous as other vaccine-preventable diseases. Flu complications send more than 200,000 Americans on average to the hospital annually, and death rates linked to the flu can be as high as 49,000 in a single year.

The varying degree of each year’s vaccine efficacy is no excuse for avoiding an annual flu shot. Regardless of effectiveness, the flu vaccine remains the best method to protect and reduce severity of the virus. Whether it’s a mild season like this year’s or more severe like last year’s, to help individuals avoid the unwanted illness, we must continue to advocate for the annual flu shot.

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