

Ricardo Jose Gonzalez-Rothi: Know the facts about flu shots

Written by Ricardo Jose Gonzalez-Rothi My View

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For a video of Ricardo Jose Gonzalez-Rothi talking about flu vaccines, go to Tallahassee.com and click on Opinion.

For more information on influenza from the Centers for Disease Control, visit www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/flu-season.htm.

I saw Randy die in 2009. He was 50 years old, very healthy, avid runner, worked in a hospital. He had a high fever and sore throat, got really tired and thought, “Well, I’m just coming down with a cold.” But after a day or so he was feeling much worse. He went to a neighbor’s house, knocked on the door and said, “I’m sick. Can you take me to the emergency room?”

Shortly after he got there, they put him on life support. Within a day he became comatose. He developed respiratory failure, shock and kidney failure. Five days later, he died.

This is an extreme case, but it goes to show you what can happen with influenza. While most deaths from the flu are in children or in people older than 65 with debilitating medical conditions, it doesn’t mean that other people are spared. During that year I saw four people die from the flu — including a pregnant woman and her unborn child.

I have had healthy people like Randy tell me they don’t get a flu shot because they heard it can give you the flu. Well ... can it? The answer is no.

Influenza is caused by a virus that circulates around the world in seasonal epidemics, generally in late fall and winter for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere. The virus is spread by sneezing or coughing into the air, or by touching something like a doorknob or elevator button recently contaminated by a person who has the flu. The tricky thing is, once you’re infected, you can transmit the flu to someone else as much as a day before you actually feel sick, and as much as a week afterward.

Flu symptoms are a combination of fever, chills, sore throat, muscle or joint aches, headaches, runny or stuffy nose — less often accompanied by nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. These symptoms are caused not only by influenza but also by a host of other viruses, many of which occur at the same season of the year as influenza. So if you get the flu vaccine at your doctor’s office Tuesday, then feel flu symptoms Wednesday, you might assume that the flu vaccine was the culprit.

No. Two vaccines are available for the flu: a shot and a nasal spray. The shot contains killed virus. The spray contains a partially inactivated virus strain that can survive only in the “cooler” areas of the body, like the lining of your nose. Neither vaccine has been shown to cause the flu.

So why did you get sick on the day after you got the flu shot? Most likely you developed a flu-like illness caused by one of those multiple other viruses, which are transmitted the same way as the flu. It’s also possible that someone in the doctor’s office who had influenza may have infected you by sneezing or coughing while you were in the waiting room, or that you touched a doorknob that someone with the flu had just handled on the way out. Or, least likely ... you may have been infected with the flu virus a day or so before but hadn’t developed symptoms yet. The vaccine takes up to two weeks to afford protection in most people.

So there you have it.

Over the past 30 years, anywhere from 3,000 to 49,000 people per year have died in the U.S. as a result of the flu. If you're healthy and don't get the vaccine, you probably figure you can tough it out and take your chances. That's a personal choice. But think beyond yourself for a minute. What if your grandmother who has congestive heart disease catches the flu from you? What about your pregnant wife, your child or your co-worker?

If you get the flu vaccine, you'll likely be protected from getting the flu and, better yet, from passing it on to a loved one or colleague. It's your call.

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