Take the Shot

Protect yourself with the flu vaccine.

September 28, 2010 By Laura Whitehorn

Rumors about the seasonal flu vaccine seem to return as regularly as seasonal flu itself, spreading misinformation everywhere and scaring people with HIV/AIDS.

Here are some basic facts:

People with HIV can get vaccinated. One study showed that people whose CD4 count is low (below 350) were less likely to benefit from the vaccine. But that doesn't necessarily mean it won't protect you.

The vaccine does not raise the viral load of people who are taking HIV meds. It might raise the viral load for people not on meds, but only temporarily (a "blip").

Vaccination does not give you the flu. However, some people do feel flu-like symptoms after getting the shot, reflecting an immune reaction. The purpose of a vaccine is to activate your immune system against a specific set of germs. Immune activity can make you feel temporarily feverish and achy—but not nearly as feverish and achy as the flu itself would make you feel.

People with HIV are advised to avoid nasal spray versions of the flu vaccine. They contain live flu virus and haven't been tested in immune-compromised people.

Getting the flu vaccine may help you avoid pneumonia. Pneumonia is among the most dangerous complications of influenza. And people with HIV, no matter what their CD4 count, seem more prone to getting pneumonia than other people.

And last but certainly not least: This year's vaccine immunizes against H1N1 as well as seasonal flu, offering double protection.

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