

## Flu season s coming and so are flu shots

VANCOUVER - At office buildings and medical clinics across the province, people are rolling up their sleeves and steeling themselves for the annual prick of the flu shot.

About one million British Columbians include a date with the needle in their fall calendar each year. But there are still plenty who opt not to get the vaccine, for reasons ranging from a fear of needles to a belief that the vaccine is not all that effective.

"The flu shot is still very controversial," said Caleb Ng, a naturopathic doctor who works out of Surrey's Mountainview Wellness Centre.

It's controversial in terms of whether it actually prevents against the strain of influenza that comes about during the season."

Ng is not strictly opposed to the vaccine, but he recommends boosting the immune system and practising good hygiene as an alternative to getting an annual flu shot.

He believes the vaccine can give people a false sense of security about their health and notes that there have been no long-term studies done on the effects of having the shot year after year.

Rather than a prick in the arm, Ng suggests getting plenty of rest, washing hands regularly, and taking a good multivitamin, as well as vitamin C and possibly oil of oregano. Oil of oregano is a foul-tasting liquid extracted from wild oregano plants that is believed to boost the immune system and that Ng says has natural antiviral and antibacterial properties.

Ng's clinic also offers naturopathic intravenous treatments that he says work as vitamin and mineral boosters.

But for those who are firm believers in the flu shot, this year's vaccine will protect against three new influenza strains.

Dr. Perry Kendall, B.C.'s provincial health officer, said two of the strains in last year's vaccine were not well matched to the types of flu that were circulating.

Figuring out which flu strains to include in each year's vaccine is something of a guessing game. The vaccine needs to be created months before the beginning of flu season (which normally hits in early November), leaving scientists to look at which strains are circulating in the southern hemisphere as the only means of prediction.

"The guesses were a bit off last year," Kendall said. "This year people are assuming there will be a better match."

It's difficult to predict the severity of the coming flu season, but Kendall recommends everyone get the shot as a preventative measure.

When the strains are properly matched, Kendall says the vaccine offers 70 to 90 per cent protection against the flu for people who are relatively young and healthy.

In B.C., many people receive the flu shot through their employer and many qualify for a free flu shot from the province. Those who qualify for the free shot include children between six and 23 months of age, seniors who are 65 and older, and pregnant women who will be in their third trimester during the flu season.

Ng says people between their teenage years and their early 40s often have immune systems strong enough to fight off illness without the vaccine.

And he notes that there's a positive aspect to being struck by a flu.

"If you do fight it off on your own, you'll have lifelong immunity from that strain of flu . Your body remembers it."

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## About the Author

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