

Influenza Vaccination in Children with Egg Allergy: What You Should Know*

WHAT IS THE INFLUENZA VACCINE?

This vaccine is formulated each year to protect against what is expected to be the type of “flu” that may occur in the flu season. It is NOT formulated to protect against “Bird Flu.”

WHO SHOULD GET THE VACCINE?

Over the past several years, the recommendations have changed to include an increasing number of potential candidates for the vaccine. The influenza vaccine is now recommended for the following people:

- 1) Children aged 6-59 months
- 2) People with chronic medical conditions, such as asthma
- 3) Pregnant women
- 4) People who are ≥ 50 years old
- 5) People in nursing homes or long term facilities
- 6) Household contacts of people who are at high risk of developing complications from the flu
- 7) Household contacts of children < 6 months of age
- 8) Healthcare workers

You may wish to discuss your child’s eligibility for the vaccine with your pediatrician. Your pediatrician can also review the effectiveness of the vaccine and typical side effects.

WHAT ABOUT EGG ALLERGY AND THIS VACCINE?

Influenza vaccines contain measurable and variable amounts of egg protein. Therefore, vaccination presents an allergic risk for people with egg allergy. The influenza nasal spray vaccine also contains egg.

The MMR vaccine does not contain appreciable egg, and is considered of no special risk for persons with egg allergy. Therefore, tolerating MMR does not indicate the flu vaccine would be tolerated.

CAN OR SHOULD A PERSON WITH EGG ALLERGY GET THE VACCINE?

The answer to this question is not straight-forward because the vaccine presents a risk that must be weighed against potential benefits. The risks may be higher depending upon the amount of egg in the vaccine and the severity of the egg allergy. The benefits may be more important for a child with worse asthma, an immune system weakness (e.g., a child on cancer chemotherapy) or other factors.

Children with “anaphylactic” egg allergy

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Committee on Infectious Disease (in a document called the REDBOOK) says that children with “systemic anaphylactic” egg allergy should “generally not receive [the vaccine] because of a risk of adverse reactions, the likely need for yearly immunization, and the availability of [medications] against influenza infection.”

They define anaphylactic egg allergy as generalized hives, drop in blood pressure, or upper or lower airway blockage after eating egg. Jaffe Institute doctors are reluctant to administer influenza vaccine to children with this history and current egg allergy. If the potential benefits are overwhelming, vaccine testing and gradual administration (see below) over 5 injections could be considered.

Children without “anaphylactic” egg allergy or severity not known.

Most children with egg allergy have not experienced anaphylaxis. Some may have had mild reactions and some may not know what would happen if they ate egg because they avoid it based upon a positive test. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know “severity” from a positive blood or skin test to egg (or vaccine). You or your doctor may have a good guess about severity from your child’s experiences and underlying allergic problems (e.g., asthma, past severity of reactions). However, there is no certain way to know.

The AAP Redbook says that “Less severe or local manifestations of allergy to egg are not contraindications to administration of influenza vaccine and do not warrant skin testing.” This would mean that if your child definitely has mild reactions to eating egg, they could get the vaccine in the usual manner (a single injection). However, Institute doctors recognize that this situation still presents some degree of risk, and that the severity is often unknown. Depending upon the flu vaccine and your child’s history, your preferences, your pediatricians preferences and other factors, we may perform testing and possibly a step-wise injection.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN TESTING?

Depending upon the factors described above, allergy testing with the vaccine may be recommended. Skin testing will initially be done with the influenza vaccine by the standard prick testing method. **YOUR CHILD MUST BE OFF OF ANTIHISTAMINES FOR THIS TESTING** (the number of days off varies by type of antihistamine, ask our office staff). If the prick test is negative, “intradermal” skin testing may be done. In this test, a small needle is used to inject diluted vaccine into the skin.

If tests are negative, the vaccine may be given in a single injection. If the tests are positive, which in our past experience they most often are, then decisions about giving the vaccine are made.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN GIVING THE VACCINE?

If the skin testing is positive, either the vaccine will not be given or the vaccine may need to be given in multiple doses, depending upon various factors (risks, potential benefits,

amount of egg in the vaccine, etc). Depending upon these assessments, your doctor may provide the vaccination in 2 to 5 divided doses. The injections will start with a small amount of the vaccine and will increase with each dose given. The injections will be given approximately 15-20 minutes apart. Your child will be observed for approximately 30 minutes following the last injection. Even when the vaccine is given slowly in this manner, there is a risk of an allergic reaction, including anaphylaxis. You will be asked to sign a form indicating that you understand the risks. The total appointment time could be up to 3 hours, or longer if significant reactions occur.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD I KNOW?

People getting the vaccine for the first time are advised to get 2 doses. Depending upon the availability of vaccine and number of people coming for evaluations, we may not be able to accommodate second vaccinations. If first vaccination was performed without a reaction, we may advise the second vaccine to be given by your pediatrician. *It is likely that we will be suggesting uses of vaccines that would be considered "off-label" because the dosing, risk about egg allergy, and/or age group for which the vaccine is intended is not as directed on package labeling.* You will be informed of this and asked to sign a form indicating that you are aware of this and agree. Vaccine visits are time consuming and directed; please do not plan to address additional allergic problems during a visit for flu vaccine. Your egg-allergic child must be currently healthy to receive the vaccine (no increasing rashes, hives, current wheezing, etc).

**This information is based upon recommendations from the 2006 Redbook from the American Academy of Pediatrics, expert opinion, and upon experiences over several past seasons. The availability of influenza vaccine, and the amount of egg in the vaccines can vary seasonally and our recommendations may change accordingly. The above should not be construed to represent a single possible course of action. Your child's specific history and ongoing experiences with the available preparations may indicate a different course of action. Last updated 9-26-06.*