

Seniors largely spared of swine flu

September 17 2009, By MATT SEDENSKY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Seniors who for years have made flu shots a fall ritual are being sent to the end of the line for the swine flu vaccine. And the reason - their age group seems to have a bit of immunity - appears to have warded off most potential grumbling.

"I don't worry about getting it," said 89-year-old Robert Goodman, a Boca Raton retiree. "At this age, who the hell cares? You take it as it comes."

Across Florida, a retirement dreamland that is home to about 3.2 million people 65 and older, seniors who are typically plagued by nearly any spreadable illness are just happy they appear to have been given a reprieve from the new flu virus that has run rampant through schools, colleges and campsites.

In an Associated Press-GfK poll released last week, 82 percent of seniors said they're likely to seek a swine [flu shot](#). That's higher than any other age group surveyed. But in interview after interview, they also expressed wide acceptance of the government's orders to put other, more at-risk people ahead of them.

"We've been exposed to so many illnesses in our lifetime that if there's anything out there to be exposed to, we've probably already been exposed to it," said Jill Svoboda, a 68-year-old retired teacher from Bushnell, Fla. "I've had a damn good life. I'd like it to continue, but if it doesn't, them's the breaks."

Doctors, nurses and others who regularly deal with the elderly say they've had some inquiries about the swine flu vaccine from seniors, but that older patients are understanding when they explain how it will be distributed.

"There's actually some relief - not when I say you're not going to get the vaccine, but when I say you're not going to need it," said Dr. John Murphy, a geriatrician in Providence, R.I., who teaches at Brown University and is chairman of the board of the American Geriatrics Society. "And as that message gets out more and more, there will be less concern."

Federal guidelines call for the new H1N1 vaccine to be given first to [pregnant women](#), those who live with or care for children 6 months or younger, health care workers, people aged 6 months through 24, and people with chronic health problems or compromised immune systems. Those groups total about 159 million people.

Only after shots are offered to those groups will the vaccine be available to healthy adults 64 and younger. After that, if it is still available, seniors ages 65 and older would be eligible.

Swine flu was first identified in April and is now responsible for almost all flu cases in the United States. It has caused more than 1 million illnesses so far, though most were mild and not reported. Nearly 600 Americans have died from it. Though the elderly have been less likely to catch swine flu, those who do get it are more likely to become seriously ill, government doctors say.

Researchers believe seniors have a partial immunity to swine flu because of exposure to similar viruses in their lifetimes. It is a rare bit of good news before the start of the regular flu season, which generally kills 36,000 people a year, most of them elderly.

Around the country, places where older people live and congregate are stepping up efforts to educate seniors about flu and to get them immunized against seasonal flu.

At Barton Healthcare, which runs nine nursing homes, assisted living developments and long-term care centers in Chicago and Peoria, Ill., staffers are stockpiling latex gloves and hand sanitizers, posting signs at entrances telling sick visitors to stay away.

"In these settings, it spreads like wildfire," said Marian Simon, the chief nursing officer for the network. She said residents are being urged to get both the seasonal [flu vaccine](#) and the pneumonia vaccine, but are telling them they're unsure about the swine flu shots.

"I don't even want to tell them. I don't want panic."

On the whole, though, the potential for panic seems minimal, with many [seniors](#) expressing views similar to Judy Pepiton, a 66-year-old retired office manager from Phoenix: "I know people are dying from this, but I guess I don't really think that I'm high risk."

And, recognizing their own mortality, many older Americans, are taking swine flu warnings in stride.

"There's a lot of other illnesses and accidents I could be concerned about," said 62-year-old Michael Kozubek, a retired lawyer from Chicago, who got his seasonal flu shot but isn't worried about swine flu. "I could die of a million things."

On the Net:

CDC [swine flu](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/vaccination/acip.htm) vaccine recommendations:
<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/vaccination/acip.htm>

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Citation: Seniors largely spared of swine flu (2009, September 17) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-09-seniors-largely-swine-flu.html>

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