

Government urges universal flu vaccinations

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Flu vaccine will soon be available at local pharmacies and doctor's offices, and government officials are urging everyone over 6 months of age to receive it. This year's vaccine protects against H1N1 and two other strains of seasonal flu.

The recommendation represents a break from past years, when the government focused on vaccinating people in certain "high-risk" groups and those in contact with people at high risk.

"The message is simple now," said David Weber, MD, MPH, professor of medicine, pediatrics and epidemiology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "If you're more than 6 months of age, get the [vaccine](#)."

"In an average year, there are more than 200,000 hospitalizations and more than 35,000 deaths from [flu](#). Many of those would be preventable by simply getting the [flu shot](#)," said Weber. "Flu shots are far and away the best way for preventing flu."

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, a [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) advisory panel that set the recommendation for universal vaccination cited last year's H1N1 outbreak—which affected many young, healthy people not traditionally considered to be at high risk for complications from flu—as part of the reason for the change. In addition, the list of conditions that put a person at high risk has grown so much over the years that many people are unaware of their high-risk status. Universal vaccination is expected to

better protect individuals and the population as a whole.

People should receive the vaccine every year as soon as it becomes available, said Weber. "It's important every year. This year it may be more important because anybody who didn't get H1N1 last year is susceptible to it, and since that was the first year H1N1 was around, many people, if not most people, are susceptible."

The vaccine is reformulated each year to provide protection against the virus strains that present the greatest public health threat for that year. People who contracted H1N1 last year may have a lower chance of contracting it again this year, but they should still receive the vaccine for protection against seasonal flu.

Provided by University of North Carolina School of Medicine

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