Time to get vaccine against regular winter flu

September 10 2009, By LAURAN NEERGAARD , AP Medical Writer

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius gestures during a briefing about the upcoming seasonal flu season, Thursday, Sept. 10, 2009, at the National Press Club in Washington. (AP Photo/Luis M. Alvarez)

(AP) -- It's time to get the first of at least two flu shots recommended for many Americans this fall - the vaccine against regular winter flu is ready.

Despite all the headlines about the new swine flu, doctors do expect some garden-variety influenza to hit this fall, too. Health authorities on Thursday urged people to go ahead and get that first inoculation out of the way before the lines start forming for swine flu vaccine next month.

"The single best way to protect yourself and your loved ones against the flu is to get vaccinated," said Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

Sebelius told a briefing on Thursday that people need to take individual responsibility to stay healthy this flu season. She planned to get her own seasonal flu shot on Friday.

Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, added that "this year we are in uncharted territory." That, he said, is a key reason that officials want people to get the seasonal shot out of the way early, so the nation can focus on the swine flu."

Swine flu right now is the world's dominant strain of influenza.

But "we must not let our guard down against seasonal influenza," said Dr. William Schaffner of Vanderbilt University, president-elect of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases.

More than 110 million doses of vaccine against regular winter flu are expected this year, according to a new estimate from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's not quite as much as last fall's record supply. But typically fewer than 100 million Americans seek flu vaccine, even though it's recommended for the vast majority of the population, including:

-Adults 50 and older.

-All children age 6 months to 18 years.

-Pregnant women.

-People of any age with chronic health problems like asthma, heart disease or a weakened immune system.

-Health workers.

-Caregivers of the high-risk, including babies younger than 6 months.

Don't like shots? There's a nasal-spray version of the vaccine, called FluMist, available for people 2 to 49.

Typical influenza is most dangerous to people 65 and older - they account for 90 percent of the usual 36,000 flu deaths in this country every year. But children are flu's prime spreaders, often taking it home to parents and grandparents - and between 80 and 100 U.S. children die from regular flu every year.

Now comes the confusing part.

The new swine flu, what scientists formally call the 2009 H1N1 strain, isn't hitting older adults nearly as hard - but it's spreading rapidly among children and young adults, and deaths so far have been mostly among people in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

The regular flu vaccine won't protect you against swine flu - that will require a separate inoculation once that vaccine starts arriving in mid-October. And many of the same groups who most need regular flu vaccine are on the priority list to be first in line for swine flu vaccine:

-Pregnant women.

-Children starting at 6 months, up through young adulthood, 24.

-Health workers.

-Younger adults with risky health conditions.

Stay tuned: Still to be determined is whether it will take one dose or two of the swine flu vaccine to protect against the new virus.

On the Net:

Health and Human Services Department: http://www.hhs.gov/

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