

INFLUENZA IMMUNISATION and CFS/ME

The question often arises as to whether it is advisable for those with CFS/ME to have flu immunisation. It is always a dilemma, as no-one suffering from CFS/ME wants the added burden of an attack of influenza. However, there are reports of risk of relapse, and there are a number of people whose illness may have started following an immunisation.

We now know that CFS/ME is an illness involving the immune system. It is therefore highly likely that anything which impacts on the immune system (such as an immunisation) could have adverse effects. But at the same time there are many with the illness who have had no adverse effects following immunisation. Many with CFS/ME never get flu or a cold while they have the illness, and may in fact say things such as; "I knew I was getting better, as I began to get normal colds again".

Undoubtedly, there are aspects of the immune system which are highly activated (and may be protective) – but there are other aspects of the immune system which may become somewhat depleted (e.g. Natural Killer cells) making a person therefore possibly more prone to some infections. This confirms what we now know about this very bizarre illness i.e. that there are a number of subgroups, probably genetically determined, under the CFS umbrella.

This does not help you decide whether it is wise or safe for you to have a flu immunisation.

There are certainly some patients who have other underlying or accompanying diseases, such as asthma or heart disease, or who are more vulnerable because they are older. For these people flu can risk serious complications, so you have to weigh up the risk/benefit ratio carefully. – as you have to do so often with a complex illness such as CFS/ME. So for these groups, maybe the immunisation would be wise.

If however, you are not a person who has risk of serious complications from flu, then think about the decision to immunise carefully. It may be that you are "lucky" in that your CFS/ME would protect you anyway. Or maybe you are unfortunately stuck at home most of the time, and therefore risk of infection is minimal. Deciding not to immunise may therefore be your best option. If you are working, and in a particularly vulnerable occupation (e.g. teaching or nursing) risk of infection is greater, so you may decide immunisation is your safest option.

If the decision is to have an immunisation, then it is important to choose a time when your health is at its "best". Do not decide to do it during a relapse, or at a time when you are overtired or stressed. And it would be wise to choose a time when you can rest up for a day or so afterwards, to allow recovery should you have a reaction. During this recovery phase, avoid too much exercise.

If you have had a bad reaction to any immunisations in the past, you would be wise to avoid all immunisations unless considered essential.

Some people with CFS/ME say they want the immunisation because they get so many colds or sore throats. However, flu immunisation will not protect against the common cold or a sore throat, or any bacterial infection. It will only work against real viral influenza, which is more of a generalized illness. Many with CFS/ME **think** they get a lot of infections causing sore throats or flu, but these are not usually true infections – just the immune system giving out the wrong messages. The immune system is surging up as if it were fighting infection, when no actual infection is there. If an infection truly exists, the white cell count in the blood will be altered to prove it. When the immune system surges it is responsible for causing symptoms, such as fever, muscle aches, sore throats etc.

The decision as to whether to immunise against flu is therefore a complex one, and very individual. Weigh up the pros and cons, discuss it with your doctor, and be guided by your risk factors. In summary:

Avoid immunisation if:

- a. You have had a previous bad reaction
- b. Your illness started following an immunisation
- c. You are particularly unwell at present

Consider immunisation if:

- a. You have other serious health problems
- b. You are in a high risk occupation
- c. You have been immunised before while suffering from CFS/ME and been OK.

Other Options:

There are other things you could do to help protect yourself against infections.

Increase garlic in your diet (a good anti-viral protection).

Have plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Keep away from people you know have infection if possible.

Don't be embarrassed to wear a mask if going into an unhealthy (buggy) environment

Wash hands regularly, particularly before meals or handling food.

Rest up properly at the first sign of developing an infection

Avoid sport if you have early signs of infection

Consider the anti-influenza drug Tamiflu if you sense you are getting flu. (available on prescription).

What is Tamiflu?

Tamiflu is the trade name of the anti viral drug, Oseltamivir, specifically designed to treat influenza. It has to be taken at the first signs of infection to be really effective. It is not a preventative drug. It needs to be taken regularly for 5 days. Most people with CFS/ME tolerate it well.

It has to be obtained on prescription and is quite expensive. Your doctor may be willing to give you a "back-pocket" prescription for this drug, which you would keep handy and then only pick up at the pharmacy if you need it. But remember prescriptions do expire after 3 months.

What about antibiotics?

Antibiotics only work against bacterial infections. They do not work for viral infections. Colds and flu are caused by viruses, and you would only need antibiotics if your doctor thought you had a secondary bacterial infection.

