Parting Shots

(Yes, I mean those kinds of shots!) 

It seems as if a perfect storm may be approaching. In the chapter entitled "Vaccines & Other Stuff" it was discussed that influenza is with us year round. However, flu makes itself known mostly from October through May, with the peak of the season being December through February. This year it seems as if "flu season" is going to collide with Covid-19.

If you become ill, how will you know which disease has found you? The table below outlines the most common symptoms of each disease:

Influenza	**Covid-19**
Chills & fever	Chills & fever
Body aches	Body aches
Cough	Cough
Sore throat	Sore throat
Headache	Headache
Fatigue	Fatigue
Vomiting & diarrhea	Vomiting & diarrhea

You – "Ah, wait just one minute! Those symptoms are exactly the same."

Me – " Yes, they are. So I go back to my original question. How will you know which disease has found you?"

The only way to know which disease has found you is to be tested. I suspect people who become ill this flu season will be tested for both diseases in order for the physician to know which you have & treat you appropriately. There is, however, one way you can help yourself, your family & friends, & your physician this year. And that is to get a flu shot.

Okay, so this is coming from someone who, up until about 5 years ago, did NOT get a yearly flu shot. Seriously?! You're a nurse who worked in a hospital & didn't get flu shots? Yup!

I grew up watching my dad get flu shots every year. And every year, just like clockwork, he would have a fever, chills, & body aches within 48 hours of having his shot. Why on earth would I want to get a flu shot when they made him sick?! To quote my mother, “Live & learn.” So I learned.

I learned that side effects from flu shots include: fever, chills, headache, & body aches. Why? Because the vaccine is doing exactly what it is meant to do……it is creating an immune response. The vaccine is kicking the body’s immune system into action so that, if/when it encounters a sneaky flu cell, it can say, “Hey! I know you! You aren’t welcomed here! Watch this!” as it goes into action to destroy the flu cell. It is the ramping up of the immune system after the shot which can result in the above symptoms, & not that one “gets the flu” from the shot.

Another reason I didn’t get a flu shot was because, quite frankly, I DON’T LIKE SHOTS. There is a HUGE difference between GIVING a shot, & GETTING a shot. In my mind it is a matter of “tis better to give than to receive”. And I’d much rather <u>give</u> a shot than receive one.  (Just being honest here…..)

At any rate, when my employer began saying that staff that refused flu shots would have to wear a mask, all day, every day, for the entire flu season, I decided it was time to bite the bullet. I’ve gotten flu shots every year since. And I’m still here to tell about it!

Will getting a flu shot prevent one from getting the flu? Unfortunately, no. Each year scientists/physician scientists research which strains of influenza are likely to be prevalent that year. A flu vaccine is then manufactured that contains two (2) A strains & two (2) B strains of influenza. Sometimes the flu has other ideas & the vaccine is less effective than intended. Effectiveness of the flu vaccine fluctuates every year, with 50% effectiveness being a good vaccine year.

That really shouldn’t deter anyone from being vaccinated, though. Even in those years when the flu vaccine isn’t especially effective at preventing the flu, there is evidence that the severity of illness in those who have been vaccinated is less than in those who have not been vaccinated.

Another issue that comes into play with flu vaccines is that the virus genome changes. Influenza viruses are similar in structure to SARS-CoV-2. A flu virus is a round(ish) structure of RNA, enveloped in a lipid (fat) layer, with spike proteins protruding through the surface of the cell. The virus is capable of combining with other viral cells, trading genetic material, & recombining to form what is, essentially, a new virus.

Additionally, influenza immunity declines over time. It is the declining immunity, the changing virus, & over 130 known influenza virus combinations that create the situation where flu vaccines need to be a yearly ritual.

It takes approximately two (2) weeks for the flu vaccine to become effective. In order to be protected by the time flu season, & especially peak flu season arrives , the ideal vaccination time is September & October.

As for a Covid-19 vaccine, as discussed in "Vaccines & Other Stuff", that is still in the works. There are at least two(2) vaccines in the US that have entered phase 3 clinical trials. Filtering out as much hype as possible, it is my opinion that it will be late 2020 or early 2021 before a Covid-19 vaccine is ready for prime time, large scale distribution.

That being said, when such a vaccine hits the market, it is very likely that, at least initially, quantities will be limited. By that I mean that there will not be 330,000,000 doses available so every person in the United States can walk into the doctor's office & get a shot. There are a number of panels within the NIH (National Institute of Health), NAM (National Academy of Medicine), CDC (Centers for Disease Control), etc. who have been tasked with developing a plan for the distribution of the vaccine.

I cannot stress enough the importance of receiving a flu vaccine this fall. I would encourage everyone, after consulting with your physician, to roll up that sleeve & get a flu shot this year. I know I will. I will also be in line, when it is available, to roll up my sleeve & get a Covid-19 vaccine. Remember, these vaccines will not only protect you, they will also protect those you love. And in the meantime:

PRACTICE PHYSICAL DISTANCING

AVOID CROWDED INDOOR PUBLIC PLACES

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STAY HYDRATED (allow your 1st line of defense, your skin & mucus membranes, to do their job!)

WEAR A FACE MASK THAT COVERS YOUR NOSE & MOUTH (masks with valves are not suitable because they provide a juicy spot for potentially infected exhaled, as well as inhaled, air to concentrate for viral transmission; face shields are also not suitable for the same reason; if you use a face shield it should be in conjunction with a mask)

WASH YOUR HANDS, WASH YOUR HANDS, WASH YOUR HANDS

Information from: CDC (Centers for Disease Control)

NIH (National Institute of Health)

NAM (National Academy of Medicine)