Dear Alice,

If you had the swine flu vaccine in 1976, and had side effects from it, should you receive the swine flu vaccine that is being offered in 2009?

Answer

Dear Reader,

No one really looks forward to getting a shot, but for the vast majority of people, vaccines are very safe. Some people experience mild side effects like soreness after receiving a vaccine, and rarely people report more serious problems. In your case, the best course of action is to tell your health provider about your previous symptoms, and then follow the provider’s advice for future vaccinations. Generally speaking though, getting vaccinated is the safest and most sure-fire way to ward off the flu.

Each year, there are several influenza (flu) strains floating around. Like a necklace, each flu strain is made of a unique string of viral DNA. The 1976 swine flu and the 2009 swine flu are different strains in the family of H1N1 flu viruses. These two versions of the swine flu are different enough that being vaccinated in 1976 won't protect you from the 2009 strain. Similarly, the current H1N1 flu vaccine will not necessarily prompt the same side effects you experienced in ’76. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that people vaccinated in 1976 still get the 2009 H1N1 vaccine.

In the United States, the H1N1 flu vaccine is also recommended for:

- Pregnant women
- Caregivers of children under six months old
- Health care workers
- Everyone ages six months to 24 years (it's easy for the flu to spread in schools and dormitories where children and young adults often live and study close together)
- Adults under age 65 with health conditions like heart disease, lung disease, and cancer (these health problems may increase the risk of complications from the flu)

[List adapted from the article H1N1 flu (swine flu) vaccine Q&A from the Mayo Clinic.]
The most common symptoms after getting a flu shot or any other vaccine are temporary redness or mild soreness at the injection site. For flu shots in particular, egg and chicken allergies are also a concern. Influenza virus particles are grown in chicken eggs and then harvested to make the seasonal and H1N1 flu vaccines. If you’re allergic to eggs, but are otherwise healthy and not currently pregnant, you can receive both vaccines as a nasal spray, which is poultry-free.

In 1976, the nationwide swine flu vaccine program was halted after reports of Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), a rare disease that can cause muscle weakness and paralysis. Each year, about one to two people out of every 100,000 Americans develop GBS. Most people recover, but GBS can be fatal. According to the CDC [3], several studies have investigated the link between the 1976 swine flu vaccine and GBS. Only one showed a slight increase of GBS among people who received the '76 swine flu vaccine, amounting to about one additional case of GBS per 100,000 people vaccinated. Despite the concern, continued studies show that flu vaccines are very safe. The CDC also expects the current swine flu vaccine to offer safe protection against the 2009 swine flu.

If you still have concerns about swine flu or the vaccine, check in with a health care provider. Your provider can make the best recommendations to help you stay healthy this flu season. If you get the go-ahead for the current H1N1 flu vaccine, a quick prick should be the worst part!

Alice!

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