Mercury limits suspended for H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine to improve access

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : September 25, 2009 at 5:31 am

State health officials are taking steps to ensure Washington residents at highest risk for H1N1 (swine flu) infection have broad access to the new vaccine when it’s available. Secretary of Health Mary Selecky is temporarily suspending Washington’s limit on the amount of mercury (thimerosal) allowed in H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine given to pregnant women and children under three. “It’s vital to be sure everyone in a high risk group has the choice to be vaccinated when swine flu vaccine becomes available,” said Secretary Selecky. “Mercury-free H1N1 vaccine may not always be in stock, and we want to be sure there are no barriers to protecting people.”

The six-month suspension is effective through March 23, 2010 and applies only to H1N1 (swine flu) vaccines now being developed. As a precaution, Washington state law limits the amount of mercury that can be in vaccines for pregnant women and children under three. The secretary of health can suspend the law when there’s a shortage of vaccine or during a disease outbreak – both criteria apply to the H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine. Supplies of mercury-free vaccine will be limited, which may stop people in these groups who want the vaccine from getting it.
H1N1 vaccination is voluntary. Pregnant women and children under three are at the top of the list to get the vaccine because they’re at high risk for serious complications from swine flu. “We believe suspending the law allows health care providers to offer their patients as many choices as possible to protect themselves against H1N1," said Cindy Markus, MD, President of the Washington State Medical Association.

When the limits are suspended, the law requires that pregnant or lactating women and parents or guardians of children under 18 be told they’re getting a vaccine containing more mercury than is usually permitted. There is no specific notification method required; most patients will get a handout to read.
The mercury in vaccines is in a preservative called thimerosal. It’s been used safely for years to prevent contamination of vaccines in vials that contain more than one dose. Except for some types of flu vaccines, all vaccines routinely recommended for children under six years of age are thimerosal-free, or contain only trace amounts. While some people are concerned about the safety of thimerosal, many large, thorough studies have shown no harm caused by thimerosal in vaccines.
Federal health officials expect H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine to be available in early October. Although there will eventually be enough vaccine for everyone, supplies will be limited at first and will likely be reserved for high risk people. People are encouraged to check with their private health care provider, public health clinics, retail pharmacies, and community vaccination event organizers on locations to get the vaccine. State and local health partners are working together to identify these locations and will share that information when vaccine is available.
More information is available on the Department of Health H1N1 (swine flu) Web site (http://www.doh.wa.gov/h1n1/).