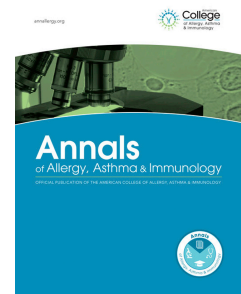


Journal Pre-proof

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PII: S1081-1206(20)31215-1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anai.2020.11.012>

Reference: ANAI 3427

To appear in: *Annals of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology*

Received Date: 23 September 2020

Revised Date: 15 November 2020

Accepted Date: 23 November 2020

Please cite this article as: Wautlet AJ, Patel PD, Chavez P, Codispoti CD, Influenza Epidemics: The Role of Allergists/Immunologists, *Annals of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology* (2020), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anai.2020.11.012>.

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Influenza Epidemics: The Role of Allergists/Immunologists

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Word count: 4,633

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Funding sources: None

Abbreviations/Acronyms:

HA= Haemagglutinin

NA= Neuramidase

IFN- λ = interferon lambda

NPI= Non-pharmaceutical intervention

WHO= World Health Organization

CDC= Center for Disease Control and Prevention

IIV= Inactivated influenza vaccines

TIV= Trivalent inactivated influenza vaccine

LAIV= Live attenuated influenza vaccine

XLA= X-linked agammaglobulinemia

CVID= Common variable immunodeficiency

Ig= immunoglobulin

IRF= interferon regulatory factor

RIG-1= Retinoic acid-inducible 1

aOR= Adjusted Odds Ratio

SD = Standard Dose

HD = High Dose

Number of Figures: 2

Number of Tables: None

Conflict of Interests:

Dr. Wautlet declares no conflict of interest.

Dr. Patel declares no conflict of interest.

Ms. Chavez declares no conflict of interest.

Dr. Codispoti declares no conflict of interest.

20-09-0632R1

Objective: To review influenza epidemics and pandemics for practicing Allergists/Immunologists
Data Sources: English language articles published in PubMed from 1990-present with relevance to allergic disorders and articles cited by or similar to these articles.

Study Selections: 472 articles were identified from PubMed. Two independent reviewers appraised the titles for relevance.

Results: 212 relevant articles were selected. Additional articles and government websites increased the number to 295 relevant citations.

Conclusion: Influenza epidemics and pandemics have recurred throughout history. Asthma and immunodeficiency patients are an increased risk. Non-pharmaceutical interventions, vaccination and neuraminidase inhibitors are key strategies for the prevention and treatment of influenza epidemics/pandemics. Allergists play a vital role in protecting high-risk groups and increasing influenza vaccination coverage.

I. Introduction

Influenza epidemics have occurred throughout recorded history and are likely to recur.

Reviewing the history of influenza epidemics and pandemics is important for the practicing allergist, as we care for high-risk patients, including those with asthma and immunodeficiencies.

Our objective is to review influenza epidemics and pandemics for practicing Allergists/Immunologists. We searched for English language articles published in PubMed from 1990-present with relevance to allergic disorders and articles cited by or similar to these. We used the MESH terms (("Influenza, Human"[Mesh] OR "Influenza Pandemic, 1918-1919"[Mesh] OR influenza*[tiab] OR flu[tiab]) AND ("Epidemics"[Mesh] OR epidemic*[tiab] OR pandemic*[tiab])) AND ("Hypersensitivity"[Mesh] OR allergy[tiab] OR allergies[tiab] OR "allergic reaction"[tiab] OR "allergic reactions"[tiab] OR "Rhinitis, Allergic"[Mesh] OR rhinitis[tiab] OR "Asthma"[Mesh] OR asthma*[tiab] OR "Sinusitis"[Mesh] OR sinusitis[tiab] OR "sinus infection"[tiab] OR "sinus infections"[tiab] OR "Allergy and Immunology"[Mesh] OR immunology[tiab]). 472 articles were identified from PubMed. Two independent reviewers appraised the titles for relevance. A third independent reviewer resolved any discrepancies between the reviewers. A total of 212 relevant articles were selected. Additional articles and government websites increased the number to 295 relevant citations that were reviewed in detail.

II. The Influenza Virus

A. Classification of Influenza Virus

Influenza viruses belong to a family of RNA viruses called *Orthomyxoviridae*. Influenza tends to be classified into three types of viruses – A, B, and C – each with different natural hosts and unique serological responses to their internal proteins. Birds tend to be the natural host for Influenza A, whereas Influenza B and C are mostly restricted to humans.(1) Type C tends to cause much less severe disease in humans, with mild symptoms similar to those seen with the common cold.(2)

Influenza A, due to its antigenic variability, has caused the most serious illness in humans. Influenza A is further classified based on the haemagglutinin (HA) and neuramidase (NA) surface antigens found on its surface. HA attaches virions to cells by binding terminal sialic acid residues on cellular surfaces, which allows for the initiation of the infectious cycle. NA, on the other hand, cleaves terminal sialic acids, leading to the release of the virion and allowing for the completion of the infectious cycle. There are currently 18 HA and 11 NA subtypes known to exist in nature.(2) While many combinations of these subtypes are possible, only three seem to circulate in humans: A/H1N1, A/H2N2 and A/H3N2.(1) The influenza genome undergoes a rapid rate of mutation due to the low fidelity of the virion's RNA-dependent RNA polymerase, which lacks proofreading capacity. As a result, the genes encoding NA and HA undergo frequent mutations, eventually mutating enough that host antibodies can no longer neutralize the virus.(3) This concept refers to antigenic drift and will be discussed later in this review.

B. The Role of HA and NA in Viral Evolution

Because HA allows the virus to attach to the surface of host cells, it is also the primary target of the host adaptive immune response to influenza. The HA protein contains two components: a globular head (HA1) and a stalk (HA2) domain (Figure 1). As the globular head is more accessible to host antibodies than the stalk, it is most often the target of the immune response.(1, 4) Given the frequent and rapid mutation potential of these proteins, one would expect that new genetic variants would appear extremely frequently; however, new H3N2 variants only appear every 3–5 years, whereas new A/H1N1 and influenza B variants appear less frequently.(1) Mapping of the antigenic evolution of the influenza virus reveals a punctuated, rather than linear, antigenic evolution, with antigenic clusters developing over time.(5) An explanation for this clustered evolution is likely multifactorial, with both viral and host factors playing a role in preventing a more linear antigenic evolution of the virus. The virus must walk a fine line when mutating to escape the targeted response of the host's antibodies. Mutations in the HA protein can allow the virus to escape the host antibodies, but may also compromise function. A review of the molecular construction of HA of human influenza A/H3N2 virus from 1968 to 2003 revealed that antigenic change was mainly caused by single amino acid substitutions found at only seven positions in HA.(6) The amino acid substitution was always located in close proximity to the receptor-binding site, suggesting that the mechanism involved in slowing the antigenic evolution of the virus could involve a reduction in receptor binding function.(6) Thus, only a small subset of mutations seems to be able to achieve both antigenic changes while also retaining receptor-binding function of HA that are necessary for viral infection.

C. Innate and Adaptive Immunity Limit Antigenic Variance

Host immunity also plays a role in antigenic variance by exerting selection pressure on the virus. Prior infection, or vaccination, leads to the extinction of some antigenic variants and the emergence of new ones. In murine models the adaptive immune response allows the host to quickly deploy IgA antibodies in the upper respiratory tract to bind and neutralize the influenza virus.(7) This response provides effective protection from previously encountered antigenic variants of the virus, but also leads to evolutionary selection of any new, previously unencountered antigenic variants that are present in a population to propagate.(1)

In a naïve host, the innate immune system plays a vital role in the body's response to infection. Mucus produced by the body's mucosal barrier is rich in sialic acid, which binds the viral HA protein and traps it before it can reach host cells and infect them.(8) Only a small number of virus particles will actually make it past this barrier to infect host cells. Infected host cells will trigger interferon-mediated responses establishing antiviral state. Murine studies revealed the importance of interferon lambda (IFN- λ) in promoting innate immunity against viral pathogens by decreasing viral replication and inducing an antiviral state in epithelial cells.(9) IFN- λ plays a role in regulating cytotoxic activity of neutrophils, another crucial player in the innate immunity response to viral infection.(9) IFN- λ also appears to play a role in improving the adaptive immunity response by triggering the release of immunoregulatory cytokines from epithelial cells.(9)

The innate and adaptive immune response of the host plays a large role in explaining relatively slower-than-expected rate of antigenic variation seen with influenza. The process of transmission has been described as a “bottleneck” which reduces both the viral load and the new antigenic variants that can propagate within recipient cells.(1) Similarly, most virus diversity that arises from a host will be lost when transmitted to a new host, making antigenic variation more difficult to achieve.

III: A Brief History of Influenza Epidemics

A. Influenza Outbreaks Prior to Twentieth Century

The influenza virus has caused epidemics and pandemics for many centuries. While pandemics lead to virus spread on a global scale, epidemics are seen when there is a spike in infection rates at the local level, often following seasonal patterns of infection. The influenza virus was not identified and isolated until the twentieth century; however there is little doubt that numerous outbreaks occurred for centuries before that. An outbreak in 1580 is often referred as the first influenza pandemic.(10) That year, the strain seems to have emerged from Asia and spread via land to North Africa, Europe, and North America, leading to wide reports of illness and death.

The eighteenth century brought two major influenza pandemics. The first occurred in 1729, originating in Russia and spreading around the globe over the ensuing three years.(11) The 1781 pandemic started in China, and then spread to Europe and Russia over eight months.(11)

The first pandemic of the nineteenth century began in winter of 1830 in China, and spread throughout Asia, Russia, and North America by 1831. The second pandemic started in Russia in 1889. This pandemic was significant for the speed with which it spread and its high number of casualties (estimated to be around one million), representing an early indication of the effects of technological advances brought by the industrial revolution on influenza outbreaks.⁽¹²⁾ Whereas earlier pandemics were often contained to spreading along commercial trading routes, the advent of the steam engine meant that the virus could spread more broadly and rapidly throughout the world.⁽¹¹⁾

B. Influenza in the Modern Age – The Spanish Flu

The twentieth century brought many technological advances that allowed for the isolation of the influenza virus from infected pigs in the laboratory for the first time in 1931 by Richard Shope.⁽¹³⁾ Before this discovery, however, the influenza had already ravaged the world with its most deadly pandemic to date: the Spanish Flu of 1918. This pandemic, caused by an H1N1 strain, ravaged much of the world and caused up to 40-50 million deaths, with most of these casualties occurring in the fall of 1918.⁽¹¹⁾ It is believed that over half of the world's population became infected. World War I led to poor sanitary conditions, overcrowding, lack of medical services, and the interaction of many nations that allowed for the virus to spread rapidly and globally.⁽¹¹⁾ Because influenza itself had yet to be isolated, let alone the discovery of a vaccine against the virus, the outbreak had to be controlled through non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), such as school

139 closures, quarantines, and banning of public gatherings.(14) The implementation of NPIs
140 in the United States was found to have significant association with reduction in mortality.
141 NPIs that were implemented earlier and for longer duration proved to have greater
142 impact.(14)

144 **C. Post World War II Outbreaks**

145
146 The first influenza vaccines were developed in the late 1930s / early 1940s. Government
147 agencies tasked to deal with public health formed in countries around the world, with the
148 Communicable Disease Center (now Center for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC)
149 formed in 1946 in the United States.(15) The post-World War II period saw a sharp
150 increase in the global population, international travelers and a growth in global trade. In
151 1957, a new H2N2 strain of influenza was discovered in China. Only those over 65 years
152 old appeared to have immunity to this strain, indicated that it may have been in
153 circulation in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century.(11) This strain spread across
154 the world over the next year and became known as the Asian Flu. For the first time,
155 scientists were able to study the response of an immunologically naïve population to the
156 influenza vaccination.(16, 17) However, only thirty million doses of the vaccine were
157 able to be distributed globally, preventing vaccination from having a significant impact
158 on the spread of the virus.(16) The fatality rate was relatively low at 0.67%, but led to 1-2
159 million deaths worldwide.(11, 18) In 1968, another new strain of the influenza virus was
160 discovered, this time in Hong Kong. The H3N2 strain led to a pandemic that became to
161 be known as the Hong Kong Flu. Despite being highly transmissible, it was even milder

than the Asian Flu, possibly in the setting of pre-existing immunity to the neuraminidase antigen (N2) that was also present in the Asian Flu.(11, 19)

D. Influenza in the Twenty First Century

No major influenza pandemic would occur until 2009. Known as the pH1N1/09 virus, or swine flu. It emerged from Mexico and the United States in April 2009. The emergence of this pandemic has been traced to re-assortments of two viruses that had been circulating in swine.(20) The virus spread throughout the world and exhibited wave pattern behavior that varied based on geographical location. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic over in August 2010. By that time, 18,500 laboratory-confirmed deaths had been declared; however, mathematical modeling suggests that the mortality of the virus was up to 10-fold higher than the laboratory-confirmed cases.(21) The swine flu pandemic also marked the first time healthcare providers were able to use both vaccination and antiviral therapy to combat the virus and try to stem its propagation.(11)

IV. Effects of influenza on Allergy/Immunology patients

A. Effects of influenza on asthma

Asthma affects 339 million people of all ages worldwide and is the leading cause of chronic disease in children.(22) It has long been understood that viral infections can lead to asthma exacerbations in all age ranges. Influenza is detected in up to 20% of acute wheezing illnesses in pediatrics and up to 25% in acute asthma exacerbations in adults.(23) In addition to exacerbations, influenza increases hospitalization rate in

patients with asthma. In a study of 6-23 month old children, the rate of hospitalization was significantly higher in those with asthma when compared to those without asthma (2.8 versus 0.6 cases per 1,000 children, respectively; $P < 0.05$).⁽²⁴⁾ The mortality rate due to influenza in patients with asthma was evaluated in an epidemiologic study spanning 8 years within the pediatric population utilizing the national influenza-associated pediatric mortality surveillance system. A total of 830 influenza related deaths occurred with 16% having asthma.⁽²⁵⁾ These studies emphasize the impact of seasonal influenza on asthma.

The effects of influenza on asthma were even more pronounced during the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic. A pediatric study found a significantly higher risk of infection of H1N1 in children with asthma compared to non-asthmatic children in a multivariate model (aOR 4.0; 95% CI, 1.8-9.0; $P < 0.001$). This difference between these 2 groups was not seen with other viral infections of rhinovirus, adenovirus and enterovirus, indicating the profound role of H1N1 in asthma.⁽²⁶⁾ Asthma was also the most common underlying condition seen in adults and pregnant women hospitalized with H1N1.⁽²⁷⁾ Pediatric asthma patients with H1N1 had increased odds of intensive care unit (ICU) admission (aOR 4.56; 95% CI 1.16 - 17.89).⁽²⁸⁾ The mortality in a pediatric ICU study of patients with H1N1 was 47%, with asthma being associated with higher mortality (aOR 1.34; 95% CI 1.20-2.91).⁽²⁹⁾ A CDC study characterizing H1N1 hospitalized patients showed that asthma was the most common comorbidity in both pediatric and adults.⁽³⁰⁾

The current primary prevention of influenza includes vaccination. The efficacy of the influenza vaccine on asthma has been summarized in a recent meta-analysis that included 1 randomized control trial and 3 observational studies.(31) An initial population-based retrospective cohort study of 1-6 year olds conducted by the CDC during 1993-1996 influenza seasons found the incidence rate ratio of asthma exacerbations after vaccination to be lower in 3 seasons when adjusted for asthma severity.(32) In contrast, a randomized, double-blinded, placebo-controlled study of pediatric patients from 6-18 years of age showed there were greater number of influenza positive asthma exacerbations in the vaccinated group; 24 in the vaccine group and 18 in the placebo group (difference of 31% after adjustment for confounders; 95% CI, -34% to 161%).(33) A Cochrane review analyzing the efficacy of influenza vaccine in patients with asthma concluded there is a lack of significant reduction in asthma exacerbations due to influenza exposure based on current available trials.(34) Despite this, there may still be a role for influenza vaccination. In a randomized double blinded placebo trial of 696 children with asthma from ages 6-18 years of age, influenza vaccination improved quality of life scores ($P=0.02$) during the weeks of an influenza-detected illness, which was not seen in other respiratory illnesses.(35)

Influenza vaccination in asthma appears to be safe and is recommended. Trivalent inactivated influenza vaccine (TIV) is safe in older children and adults without evidence of inducing asthma exacerbations following vaccination.(32) In comparison to TIV, a randomized open-label study in population of 6-17 year old patients found the rate of influenza to be lower in those receiving live attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV)

compared to TIV (4.1% versus 6.2%, respectively; 95% CI 3.9%-56.0%) without significant incidence of asthma exacerbations suggesting superior efficacy and safety.(36) In 6-11 months of age, a noted an increase in medically significant wheezing in the first 42 days after LAIV (2.3%) compared to TIV (1.5%) indicating a possible age based limitation in the safety of LAIV.(32) Another study also showed a trend for more frequent wheezing episodes in children < 12 months old who were given LAIV (3.8%) compared to IIV (2.1%).(37) These studies form the basis of current CDC recommendations.

B. Effects of Influenza on Primary Immunodeficiency:

Acquiring influenza in the setting of primary immunodeficiency can lead to a more severe course and an increase in mortality and morbidity. Data on hospitalization rate and death due to influenza in those with cellular and humoral deficiency is lacking. However, a recent survey conducted in the 2016-2017 influenza season was able to capture some data on prevalence rates within patients with primary antibody deficiency.(38) A total of 1009 pediatric and adult patients had X-linked agammaglobulinemia (XLA), common variable immunodeficiency (CVID), or hypogammaglobulinemia, doctor-diagnosed influenza was reported in 30% (30) of children and 15% (139) in adults. Comparing the rate of influenza in patients with XLA, CVID, and hypogammaglobulinemia on and off of immunoglobulin (Ig) therapy, fewer patients receiving Ig developed influenza. Within the XLA group, influenza in those receiving Ig versus not receiving Ig was 5% compared to 50% ($p<0.05$), respectively. This trend was seen in those with CVID in which 16% receiving Ig developed influenza compared to

41% in those not on Ig therapy ($p < 0.001$). Within the hypogammaglobinemia group, 14% on Ig therapy developed influenza compared to 50% not on therapy ($p < 0.001$). This may indicate the presence of some influenza neutralizing antibodies within Ig therapy.

Looking into predicative markers that allow a positive response from TIV vaccination in patients with CVID, Gardulf et al reported a rate of 16.7% response rate in their cohort of 48 patients when given the influenza A (H1N1) Pandemrix vaccine. Responders had higher proportions of enteropathies, higher levels of plasmablasts, and lower CD21 low B-cells, whereas non-responders had bronchiectasis and autoimmune cytopenias, lower mean serum IgG1, and higher mean serum IgM.(39)

Beyond antibody deficiency, patients with particular defects within the innate immune system can succumb to influenza. Two unrelated children with life-threatening influenza were found to have mutations within interferon regulatory factor 7 and 9 (IRF7 and IRF9).(40, 41) A 41-year-old previously healthy male who developed a severe course of H1N1pdm09 was found to have a genetic variant within Retinoic acid-inducible 1 (RIG-1) gene.(42) Similarly, a variant within IRF3 was found in a 55-year-old male with severe life-threatening influenza illness.(43) These defects highlight the importance of an intact innate signaling system that allows appropriate induction of type I and III interferons.

V: Prevention and Treatment of Influenza

The influenza virus has the potential to cause annual epidemics and global pandemics.

Antigenic drift results from the accumulation of minor mutations in the genes that encode

some of the antibody binding sites located on the influenza virus. A virus strain can develop several of these minor mutations, allowing it to evade the immune system and cause annual epidemics. In contrast, the influenza virus also has the potential to undergo a more rapid and radical change in viral antigenicity, most often by combining with other existing strains and leading to the development of a new viral subtype. When this sudden transformation occurs, a pandemic may develop, as previously infected individuals do not have any immunity to the new strain. This process is referred to as antigenic shift.

A. Immunization: Primary Prevention

Given the potential for epidemics and pandemics to develop, preventing influenza infections is crucial. Vaccination has proven to be the most effective means of preventing influenza and its complications. However, antigenic drift, antigenic shift, and waning immunity all complicate annual vaccination efforts, leading to the need to vaccinate individuals yearly. Despite the wide availability of the influenza vaccine in the US, since 2010-11 to 2015-16, the influenza virus is estimated to infect between 9.2-35.6 million people annually in the US alone, leading to 12,000-56,000 deaths.(44) Inactivated influenza vaccines (IIV) tend to have few side effects, the most common being soreness at the site of injection.(45) Pain, low-grade fever and fatigue are less common. Use of the IIV in pregnant women has also been found to be safe, with no identified adverse pregnancy or fetal outcomes.(46) Importantly, anaphylaxis following influenza vaccination is extremely rare. A 2010 study of 830 individuals with a confirmed egg allergy revealed no cases of anaphylaxis following the administration of the H1N1 influenza vaccine.(47) Despite its robust safety profile, over the past 10 years, the annual

influenza vaccination rates in the US population ranged from 41.7%, in the 2017-18 influenza season, to 49.2%, in the 2018-19 influenza season (Figure 2).(48)

Low adherence to influenza vaccination is multifactorial, with psychological, physical, and sociodemographic barriers all playing a role. A 2017 review of influenza hesitancy from 2005-2016 identified that having a negative attitude toward vaccines (i.e. perceived low effectiveness and lack of trust in health authorities) was the most frequently reported barrier to vaccination.(49) Other factors included low perceived risk of the disease, knowledge gaps, such as belief that the vaccine can cause the flu, lack of recommendations from medical professionals, and low frequency of interaction with health services. Another study noted that among elderly individuals, older, ethnically White, higher income individuals with access to health insurance coverage with a regular care provider were most likely to receive influenza vaccination, again indicating the socioeconomic impact on vaccination adherence.(50) Further efforts are therefore needed to address each of these barriers. At a population level, improving education on the benefits of vaccination, along with limiting the spread of misinformation regarding the influenza vaccine, which can now rapidly spread through social media use, is crucial. Continuing to lower barriers to access to healthcare by making influenza vaccine cheap and readily available is also necessary. On an individual level, strategies also include using each patient encounter as an opportunity to vaccinate and educate patients by providing up-to-date, clear recommendations. These efforts are necessary to reduce vaccine hesitancy. One of the common myths is that influenza can be contracted from the influenza vaccine, a belief held by 43% of participants of a national survey. Providing

corrective information from the CDC reduced belief in this myth, but among participants who had a high concern about vaccine side effects, this receiving this information significantly reduced their intent to receive influenza vaccination.(51) Further research is needed in this area to effectively address each individual's concern in order to increase influenza rates.

Recent estimates from the 2018-19 influenza season showed that influenza vaccination has prevented 4.4 million illnesses, 58,000 hospitalizations and 3,500 deaths.(52) Furthermore, several studies have revealed the effectiveness of the influenza vaccine in reducing illness severity, in-hospital mortality and ICU admissions when compared to unvaccinated individuals.(53, 54) For instance, one study determined that influenza vaccination reduces the risk of ICU admission and death in elderly patients (≥ 65 years) who were hospitalized.(53) Another study concluded that influenza vaccination led to reduction in in-hospital deaths for patients of any age, along with reducing ICU admission rates in patients aged 18-49 years and ≥ 65 years. ICU length of stay was also reduced in half in patients aged 50-64 years compared to unvaccinated patients.(54) A study in Spain described vaccine effectiveness (VE) in preventing both outpatient and hospital-associated influenza cases, with a VE of 89% in preventing severe cases. Furthermore, inpatient cases were associated with a lower risk of severe influenza.(55)

While the standard dose (SD) influenza vaccines have proven effective in younger patients, decreased immunogenicity and effectiveness of SD vaccines is seen in persons aged 65 years and older. Among adults 65 years and older, high dose (HD) trivalent IIV

provided greater protection against laboratory confirmed influenza illness compared to SD trivalent IIV.(56) Additionally adjuvant vaccines with up to 4 times the antigen concentration of SD vaccines have been developed for patients ≥ 65 years. A recent randomized control trial described that a recombinant high-dose (HD) quadrivalent influenza vaccine provided better protection than an egg-grown SD quadrivalent vaccine in older adults.(57) Another study reported that an HD vaccine significantly reduced respiratory-related hospitalizations compared to SD vaccine in elderly nursing home residents.(58)

While the evidence for high dose influenza vaccination accumulates at a time of immune senescence in the elderly, few randomized trials have investigated the efficacy of influenza vaccination at time of immune immaturity during infancy. This evidence gap is starting to be addressed. A recent phase III multi-center randomized control trial of children 6-36 months old, showed quadrivalent IIV was safe and effective in preventing influenza illness.(59)

B. Novel Immunization Strategies

Antigenic mismatches and relatively low vaccination rates have prevented even further decrease in disease burden, leading to the search for the development of a more broadly cross-protective vaccine. Several approaches to creating a “universal” influenza vaccine are currently underway. While current seasonal vaccines target the variable regions on the HA head, new approaches are investigating the possibility to target the HA stem instead, a region that exhibits much stronger conservation.(60) Other approaches include

developing a vaccine that elicits NA antibodies that target an epitope that is key for NA function, along with targeting internal antigens that have higher conservation across viral strains.(60)

C. Antiviral Therapy: Secondary Prevention

Antiviral therapy can provide treatment of the influenza virus. Currently, FDA-approved antiviral medications in the treatment of influenza include neuraminidase inhibitors (e.g. oseltamivir), cap-dependent endonuclease inhibitors (baloxavir marboxil) and adamantanes (amantadine, rimantadine).(61) Initiation of these medications needs to occur as soon as possible following illness onset for maximal efficacy, with greatest clinical benefit when antivirals are started within 2 days of symptoms onset.(62) A meta-analysis of the efficacy of oseltamivir in the treatment of influenza found faster time to symptom alleviation and decreased risk of lower respiratory tract complications.(63) Similar findings regarding decreased duration of illness were noted in children.(64) Oseltamivir did lead to increased nausea and vomiting in treated individuals (53). An increase in psychiatric adverse events, such as confusion, depression, and hallucinations has also been reported.(65) Therefore, careful consideration of the risks and benefits of antiviral drugs needs to be weighed prior to their initiation.

V. Role of the Allergist/Immunologist in preventing influenza epidemics

The role of the Allergist/Immunologist in influenza epidemics is a unique one in that it entails expertise in asthma and immune-deficiencies, thereby having a crucial role in

upholding the health status of two of the most vulnerable populations to influenza illnesses.

The CDC recommends vaccinating all asthma patients above the age of 6 months. Influenza vaccination rates within asthmatics ranges widely in varying parts of the world. It has been reported below 50% in adults and children in the United States.(48) Racial disparities on vaccination rates have been noted, with lower rates among black children (45%) and those of lower socioeconomic class (47%) compared to white children (51%) and those of higher socioeconomic class (54%).(66) Several interventions have been studied to increase the rate of vaccination. Positive effects have been seen with utilization of convenient vaccination services, notification of importance of vaccination, availability of vaccines within a medical facility conducive to vaccination, and providing motivation to patients and their families. These efforts increased vaccination across different racial groups in a statistically significant manner and higher than the national average by 11%.(66) Utilizing technology to remind patients via electronic letters followed by autodial recall telephone message has also proven to increase vaccination rate.(67) And finally, evaluation of egg allergic patients within an allergy practice can further increase rates of vaccination as several studies now have proven safety of IIV and LAIV in patients with egg allergy.(68, 69) Implementing evidenced-based interventional methods within the allergy/immunology office can greatly enhance immunization efforts toward influenza and thereby provide some protection to our allergic and immunocompromised patients.

414 **VIII. Conclusion**

415 Influenza virus is under constant pressure to evade immune responses. In evading the
416 immune response, small changes in influenza lead to determining the major prevalent
417 seasonal strain. Large changes in influenza can lead to epidemics and pandemics.

418 Allergists are in a unique position to protect vulnerable patients, including those with
419 asthma and immunodeficiencies, with the use of vaccinations and neuraminidase
420 inhibitors that can prevent and treat influenza infections. Allergists can increase
421 vaccination rates by reminder techniques and communicating the safety of influenza
422 vaccines in egg allergy patients.

423 (48, 70)

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[center/freeresources/graphics/images.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/resource-center/freeresources/graphics/images.htm).

FIGURES AND TABLES:

Figure 1: Structure of influenza haemagglutinin (70):

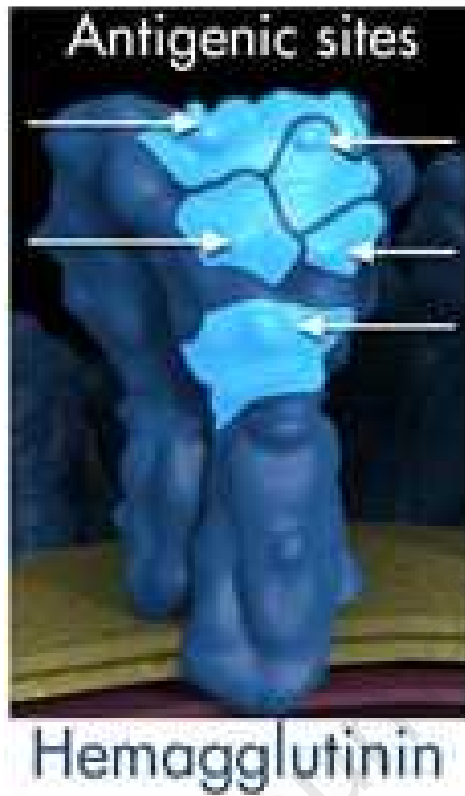
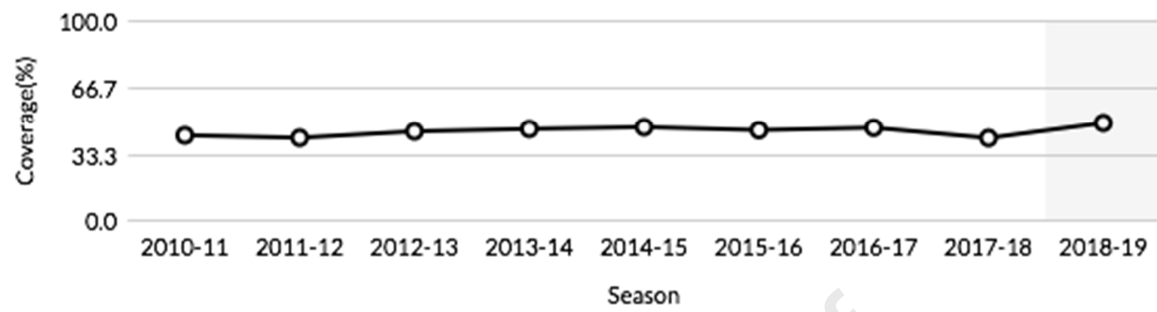


Figure 2: Influenza vaccination coverage by season (48).



Key Messages:

- Influenza epidemics have plagued the world repeatedly
- The influenza virus can make small changes that can lead to seasonal influenza epidemics or make drastic changes that can lead to pandemics.
- Allergists care for high-risk groups including patients with asthma and immunodeficiencies.
- Vaccination is a key tool to prevent epidemics and pandemics.
- Allergists can help improve influenza vaccination coverage.