

Suspension of Thimerosal (Mercury) Limits for H1N1 (Swine Flu) Vaccine: Frequently Asked Questions

September 23, 2009



What is thimerosal and why is it used in vaccines?

Thimerosal is a preservative used to prevent contamination in vaccines. It's used in vials that contain more than one dose of vaccine. Thimerosal contains a type of mercury (ethylmercury). Single dose vials of vaccine do not contain thimerosal.

What is mercury?

Mercury is a natural element found in air, soil and water. It is released through volcanic eruptions, burning coal, and weathering of rocks. Once released, bacteria can change mercury to methylmercury, which makes its way into food. At high levels, it can be toxic to people. Methylmercury is not used in vaccines.

Is thimerosal the same as mercury?

We often use "mercury" to mean "thimerosal" when we talk about vaccines. Thimerosal contains a type of mercury called ethylmercury. This ethylmercury is used in some influenza vaccines, including some of the new H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine. Studies show that the kind of mercury in vaccines (ethylmercury contained in thimerosal) breaks down and leaves the body much more quickly than the form that is found naturally in the environment (methylmercury).

What are Washington's legal limits on mercury in flu vaccine?

Washington has a law that sets a limit on how much mercury can be in vaccines for pregnant women and children younger than three years old. The law requires the flu vaccine, including H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine, given to people in these groups have no more than 1.0 microgram of mercury per 0.5 milliliter dose. Your doctor or nurse can explain the meaning of these amounts.

What do these limits mean for H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine?

Some H1N1 (swine flu) vaccines will meet the mercury limits (1.0 microgram per 0.5 milliliter dose or less) and some will not.

Are there mercury-free vaccines for H1N1?

Yes. There will be mercury-free H1N1 (swine flu) vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that about 15 percent of the total H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine available will be mercury-free, but it may not be available at all times. Since this is a small percent of the available vaccine, we cannot be sure that mercury-free vaccine will be available to all pregnant women and children under three.

Can mercury limits in vaccines be suspended?

Yes, the secretary of health can temporarily suspend Washington's legal mercury limit for a vaccine for two reasons: if there is an outbreak of a vaccine-preventable disease or a shortage of vaccine available to protect the public health against vaccine-preventable disease. The H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine qualifies under both reasons. So, the limits have been suspended.

Why are the limits being suspended?

The mercury limits are being suspended to be sure that pregnant women and children under three have access to vaccine that protects against H1N1 (swine flu). These groups are two of the targets to get vaccinated because they are at high risk for serious complications if they get swine flu infection. We've already had tragic deaths of children and pregnant women in our state and across the nation – we want to remove barriers so people can choose to be protected.

Vaccination is voluntary. Some people are concerned about vaccine safety, so we provide accurate information to help them make an informed decision. The state law was created as a precaution so pregnant women and parents or guardians of young children won't avoid vaccination due to safety concerns. The law also gives flexibility to suspend the mercury limits and protect as many residents as possible from disease outbreaks or vaccine shortages.

How long will the suspension of mercury limits last?

The six-month suspension is effective September 23, 2009 through March 23, 2010.

Will I be told that the limits are being suspended?

When the mercury limits are suspended, Washington law requires you be notified that you're getting vaccine containing more mercury than is usually allowed if you are:

- Pregnant or lactating; or
- The parent or guardian of a child under 18 getting the vaccine.

How will health care providers know if I should be notified?

Providers will screen patients to see if they or their parents or guardians must be notified. There is no single notification method required; most patients will get a handout to read.

Is it safe to get a vaccine with thimerosal (containing mercury) in it?

Immunization is one of the most important decisions people can make to protect their health. We understand that people expect the medications they take to be safe, and we encourage everyone to make informed decisions. That's why we provide accurate information to help people make the best health care decision for themselves and their families.

Several well-designed, large scientific studies have shown no harm (including autism) caused by the amount of thimerosal in vaccine. Like all medications, vaccines are not risk-free, yet vaccine side effects are very rare. Risk from an immunization is much less than the risk of suffering complications from the target-disease.

What are the health concerns with getting a vaccine with mercury in it?

Mercury in vaccines has been the focus of a lot of media stories and questions; some people believe mercury in vaccine causes autism. Despite such concerns, multiple large and well-designed scientific studies have shown no link between autism and thimerosal in vaccines.

Thorough research over many years shows that the risk of getting sick, being hospitalized, or having other serious complications from disease is greater than the risk of getting a serious reaction to a vaccine. Be sure to talk to your doctor, nurse, or clinic about the risks and benefits for you and your child.

What kind of testing has been done for vaccine safety?

Tests are underway in clinical trials to determine the safest and most effective way to give a person a vaccine that protects against this new flu virus. The H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine is made by the exact same process, using the same facilities that are used to make seasonal flu vaccine, which has a very good safety record.

When the H1N1 vaccine becomes available, it will be closely monitoring for any signs that the vaccine is causing any unexpected reactions and investigate any unusual events.

Will there be side effects?

Like any medication, vaccines may have side effects. Health care providers are trained to look for signs of side effects. They watch closely for any sign that the vaccine is causing unexpected problems and investigate unusual reactions quickly.

People who get vaccinated against H1N1 (swine flu) will be screened for health conditions that may cause a reaction (such as egg allergy). They will also get fact sheets describing the vaccine's risks and benefits — as well as signs and symptoms of side effects to look for after vaccination. This includes how to report side effects (or adverse events).

What are the potential side effects from flu vaccine?

The potential side effects are the same for seasonal and H1N1 flu vaccine. Flu shots may cause pain, redness, or tenderness where you get the injection. The nasal spray may cause mild congestion and a runny nose. Other possible side effects include muscle aches and low-grade fever — flu vaccine does not cause the flu or pneumonia. Because flu vaccine is made in eggs, it may cause a serious reaction in people allergic to eggs. People who are allergic to eggs should not get a flu vaccine.

The risk of getting sick, being hospitalized, or having other serious complications from the flu is greater than the risk of getting a serious reaction to the vaccine. Be sure to talk to your doctor, nurse, or clinic about the risks and benefits for you and your child.

What if I want a mercury-free vaccine and my provider doesn't have any?

Ask your doctor, nurse, or clinic if more mercury-free vaccine is expected and when it will be available. You might also call another provider or pharmacist to see if they have any available. Your local health agency is a good source of information in your community, too.

Where can I find more information about the suspension of mercury limits for H1N1 (swine flu) vaccine?

Our [H1N1 \(swine flu\) Web site](#) has details about the [vaccine mercury limit suspension](#).

Where can I find more information about vaccine safety?

[Vaccine safety information](#) is available online.

Where can I find more information about the H1N1 (swine flu) and its vaccine?

The [H1N1 \(swine flu\) Web page](#) has the latest information.