



Information regarding Influenza Vaccine for cancer patients being treated at the Fraser Valley Centre

Background

This objective of this document is to answer questions relating to the flu vaccine for cancer patients.

The BC Cancer Agency – Fraser Valley Centre supports the general guidelines as recommended by public health officials. These recommendations can be found at:

- <http://www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/hfile12b.stm>
- <http://www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/hfile12c.stm>

For the patients who satisfy the general guidelines and are currently receiving either chemotherapy or radiation therapy, there is no contraindication, **except:**

- allergies to vaccine components
- low white blood count (the mild general reaction to vaccine may be difficult to differentiate from chemotherapy effects such as neutropenic fever)
- if platelet count is too low (< 20,000) for injections to be given safely.

What kind of reactions may be seen with Flu Vaccines?

- Mild generalized or local reactions are not uncommon but only last for a day or two.
- The mild generalized reactions are quite variable; including mild fever, headaches, and myalgia as the more common manifestations for patient's receiving the vaccine for the first time.
- Less common symptoms include sore watering eyes, GI upset, chills, local soreness and swelling at the injection site.
- Getting a flu shot will **not** give patients the flu since it is a "killed" virus vaccine. Serious reactions are rare.
- Anaphylaxis can occur, but is usually related to the individual being allergic to eggs or the preservative thimerosal. **Patients with a documented significant allergic reaction to these or a previous "flu" shot should not be immunized.**
- In case of an outbreak these patients should discuss the use of prophylactic medication (Amantadine) with their family physician.

For patients receiving Chemotherapy

- With the exception of individuals allergic to vaccine components and/or individuals with very low WBC or platelet counts (< 20,000), there is no contraindication to receiving the flu vaccine for patients currently receiving chemotherapy.
- The antibody response is variable, perhaps only 30-50% response rate (as opposed to 70-90% in healthy individuals), but it is not predictable.
- The optimum time to receive the flu vaccine during a course of chemotherapy would be immediately prior to or after the chemotherapy injection, when CBC has been done and it is determined that the patient is not at risk of febrile neutropenia (the influenza vaccine can cause a fever) and adequate platelet count.
- Note that the mild generalized reaction to the vaccine may be difficult to differentiate between reaction to flu vaccine and a reaction to some chemotherapy agents.

For patients receiving Radiotherapy

- There is no contraindication to receiving the flu vaccine during Radiation Therapy with the exception of allergy to vaccine components.
- A very small number of patients who are receiving radiation to a large volume of their body, or who have received chemotherapy may experience low white blood cell or platelet counts.
- Check with the treating radiation oncologist first at the time of patient review regarding the need for a blood test to be done prior to immunization.