

Suspension of Thimerosal (Mercury) Limits: Frequently Asked Questions

June 2011



What is thimerosal and why is it used in vaccines?

Thimerosal is a preservative used to prevent contamination in some flu vaccines. It is used in vials that contain more than one dose of vaccine (multi-dose vials). Thimerosal contains a type of mercury (ethylmercury). Single dose vials of vaccine do not contain thimerosal. The federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) licenses flu vaccines and does not place any limits on thimerosal in vaccines for any people.

What is mercury?

Mercury is a natural element found in air, soil, and water. It is released through burning coal, volcanic eruptions, 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 the term “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. 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 law 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 given to people in these groups to 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.

Can the legal limits be suspended?

Yes. The secretary of health can temporarily suspend Washington’s 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.

Why are the limits being suspended for people with latex allergies?

The mercury limits are being suspended for pregnant women and children under three who have or may be at risk of a latex allergy. The suspension for these groups only applies to flu vaccine. The tip cap of the 2011-2012 single dose, thimerosal-free flu vaccine that comes in pre-filled syringes may contain trace amounts of natural rubber latex.

Children under three and pregnant women who have or may have latex allergies may be advised by their health care provider to avoid the thimerosal-free single dose syringes. Supplies of other types of thimerosal-free flu vaccine are limited and can’t be used for all people. Suspending the limits allows people to choose to be protected. Pregnant women, children under three, and people allergic to latex, including those at high risk for latex allergies due to spina bifida, are at high risk

for serious complications if they get the flu. Vaccination is voluntary, and we encourage people to talk to their health care provider about getting vaccinated.

How long will the suspension of mercury limits last?

The suspension will last through June 30, 2012.

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?

Health care 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 be told or get a handout to read.

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

Several well-designed, large scientific studies have shown no harm (including autism) caused by the amount of thimerosal in vaccine. [Vaccine safety information](#) is available on our website.

What are the potential side effects from flu vaccine?

Flu shots may cause pain, redness, or tenderness where you get the injection. The flu vaccine 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.

Serious side effects are very rare. Because flu vaccine is made in eggs, it may cause a serious reaction in people allergic to eggs. 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.

People who get vaccinated against 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.

Where can I find more information about the flu and flu vaccine?

Check the [Flu News website](#) for the latest information.