The flu and flu vaccines

by Dr. Michael Witte

In a recent “Classic Peanuts,” Lucy is frantically stomping out the ground in front of a prone Linus, who is coughing like crazy. She, and he, are leaving the world that much safer by stomping out Linus’ coughed up germs. A flu shot might be their next step, and probably a bit more effective! We think of flu season beginning in the fall, after school is back in session. There is no doubt that the close exposure of kids to each other, and adults’ increased time in more crowded spaces indoors, does contribute to the spread of viruses. In fact, the fall is a time that “rhinoviruses,” that family of several dozen nasty little critters that cause the common cold, show up to torture us. But Influenza A, the infamous flu, actually blows through California and the West Coast of North America from January through March in most years. Likely it will do the same this year. The flu is a nasty, even sometimes fatal, respiratory viral disease. In large measure it can be prevented if enough people get flu shots. One of the principles of immunization is called “herd immunity.” This means that when a large enough percentage of people in a population are immunized against a disease, there is so little spread that even un-immunized people become immune to getting it. So if a vaccine is safe, the more people that actually get the vaccine, the more the spread to the entire population is prevented. This becomes especially important for some of our elders, babies and other people with chronic diseases. Their immune systems may be weak enough that they don’t respond to the vaccine appropriately (it doesn’t work to protect them nearly as well) but they become indirectly protected by so many of the rest of us getting our shot. In this way, the number of people that they are exposed to with the flu is minimized.

Some myths and facts about flu shots:

• Flu shots cause the flu. The flu shot is not a live virus. It cannot cause the flu. If a person gets sick within a couple weeks of the shot, they were exposed before they got the shot.
• “I can’t get the flu shot because I’m sick.” Not true. Only wait if you have a high fever (101 or more) or are otherwise seriously ill.
• Asthma patients shouldn’t get the flu shot. Not only untrue but dangerously wrong. The flu shot is particularly important and safe for people with lung problems.
• There is not enough vaccine for everyone. There is a ton of vaccine this year. Enough for every eligible person.
• I waited too long. It’s too late. Remember, the flu peaks in February. Even January isn’t too late.
• I hate shots. There is a nasal spray called Flu Mist for healthy people between two and 50 years old (because it is a live virus its use is restricted to this age group).

There is a Flu Immunization Clinic, open to everyone, at the West Marin Wellness Day, October 15, from 3 to 6 p.m., at the Dance Palace, in Point Reyes Station.