For People with MG the Benefits from the New Swine Flu Vaccine Outweigh the Possible Risks

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Recently, articles in the press and on the internet have raised concern about danger associated with a vaccine for current version of Swine Flu. The major concern is that vaccine that is being developed will cause Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS). In the United States, GBS is a sporadic disease that causes diffuse weakness. GBS refers to diseases that damage the covering of peripheral nerve (demyelinating form) or that damages the nerve fibers and their coverings (axonal form). GBS is an autoimmune disorder, that differs from MG by attacking peripheral nerve rather than the neuromuscular junction and by usually occurring only once in a person’s life. Most cases of GBS resolve with little or no permanent residual, but the weakness during the acute illness can be very severe, sometimes requiring hospitalization and mechanical support of breathing.

The current Swine Flu is caused by a similar H1/N1 influenza virus to the virus that 1976 Swine Flu vaccine targeted. The recent internet pieces suggest that the 1976 Swine Flu vaccine caused GBS, therefore any vaccine against an H1/N1 virus may cause GBS. The articles also make reference to secret documents that raise concern about the risk of GBS from the current Swine Flu vaccine. The facts are that people who received the 1976 Swine Flu vaccine had little or no increased risk of developing GBS. A few studies in which the diagnosis of GBS was presumed and not confirmed by careful neurological examination found that the risk of was slightly increased so that 1/100,000 people who received the 1976 Swine Flu vaccine may have developed GBS (1, 2). A careful study that was published in the journal Neurology (3) did not find any increase risk for GBS among subjects who received the 1976 Swine Flu. In this study (3) the diagnosis of GBS was determined by careful neurological assessment. An additional consideration is that we now know the factors in a vaccine that can trigger GBS (4). The current Swine Flu vaccine is being constructed so that it does not contain any components that would put an individual at risk to develop GBS.

Given that people with MG are at greater risk of injury or death if they acquire the Swine Flu or any other version of influenza and that the risk of complications from the new Swine Flu vaccine is very small, it is advisable to people with MG to be vaccinated against Swine Flu. As with any individual medical decision, you should consult your general medical doctor and neurologist regarding treatment.

For the most current information regarding the symptoms of flu and H1N1 vaccination see http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/. Wash your hands frequently, cough into your elbow and not your hand, and if you have symptoms of the flu contact your doctor and stay home.

References

