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Suddenly, flu shots are must-haves

By Rita Rubin, USA TODAY

This flu season's vaccine shortage has accomplished more than family-practice doctor Douglas Farrago ever could with some of his patients: It has made them want a flu shot. Badly.



Dozens of patients wait in line to get a flu shot at the Oxmoor Center in Louisville.

By Durell Hall Jr., Louisville Courier-Journal/AP

"I used to beg people to get a flu shot, and now they're begging me," says Farrago of Lewiston, Maine. "You always want what you can't have."

With about 40 million fewer doses than expected this year, flu shots are in greater demand than World Series tickets.

The vaccine shortage developed early this month when vaccine maker Chiron couldn't deliver an expected 48 million doses — about half the U.S. supply. British authorities had suspended the company's license to make vaccine at its plant in Liverpool, England. In response, Aventis Pasteur, the only other flu-shot maker for the U.S. market, and MedImmune, maker of the inhaled FluMist vaccine, said they could squeeze out more vaccine than originally planned, bringing the total number of doses to 61 million.

Still, flu shots are highly sought-after, as evidenced by news reports of lotteries and lengthy lines. "People stand out in line for sports tickets, so I guess, in that sense, it's not unprecedented," says flu expert Richard Zimmerman, a family-practice doctor at the University of Pittsburgh. "But these were elderly people."

There is a bright side to those long lines, says Baruch Fischhoff of Carnegie Mellon

University, an expert on the public perception of risk. "I think there's really cooperative behavior," Fiscoff says. For example, he says, when his 87-year-old father waited three hours for a flu shot at a Detroit supermarket, the store provided refreshments to everyone in line.

Although they may not be crashing the lines, many patients demanding flu shots aren't in any of the high-risk groups, Farrago says. In their minds, he says, flu shots have taken on an almost magical quality.

Farrago, who writes about the situation in the latest issue of his *Placebo Gazette*, an online newsletter, tries to reassure younger, healthy patients: "If you get the flu, you're going to be fine anyway. You're not going to die from it. I've got to convince them that they're healthy now."

Those news reports about octogenarians waiting in line for flu shots are enough to panic even the healthiest people, says Virginia Tech psychologist E. Scott Geller. "The media make the flu situation scary and personal, thus getting the public more concerned than they ought to be."

The government's handling of the shortage hasn't helped, Fiscoff says. "There's probably a feeling that the whole thing is managed so badly. That probably increases people's anxiety."

Lee Clarke, a sociology professor at Rutgers University, calls the anxiety a rational response. "So many of us are going without protection," Clarke says. "Those at greater risk are even more at risk. If I get around them, I'm more likely to infect them."

Clarke likens the situation to a heightened fear of flying after a major plane crash. "We know that people tend to overestimate their vulnerabilities to risks that are readily available to their memory," he says. "Perhaps that's going on as well."

Telling people they can't get flu shots isn't the American way, Farrago says. "This is rationed health care," he says. "We will not accept that."

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