

Lupus Update with Dr. Robert Katz

Should I get vaccinated if I have SLE?

Lupus patients should generally get the usual vaccinations for protection. One of the most common is the flu vaccine. In studies examining the effect of the flu vaccine on patients with lupus, there were no serious ill effects noted other than minor skin reactions to the shot including some itching, redness, and pain. Some patients experienced headache and nausea, but importantly the vaccine did not increase lupus disease activity, even in patients with active disease at the time of the vaccination.

One recently published study in *Arthritis and Rheumatism* showed that lupus patients on immunosuppressive medications (azathioprine, Cellcept, etc.) often did better if they received two flu vaccines. When antibodies were checked for it in the blood after receiving the flu vaccine, lupus patients who were on these immunosuppressive medications or who had low white blood cell counts had much more protection and higher flu antibody levels if they received two flu vaccines rather than one.

Another question that comes up now is whether lupus patients should receive the shingles vaccine. The shingles vaccine, unlike the flu vaccines, has live virus particles. Therefore it is generally not advisable that patients taking larger doses of prednisone or immune-suppressing drugs get the shingles vaccine while they are taking those medications. But off the medication, the shingles vaccine is often a good idea either for older lupus patients or for those who are going to be taking immunosuppressive drugs in the future.

It is okay for lupus patients to take pertussis (whooping cough) vaccine or the combination of diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus vaccine. Polio vaccine involves a live virus, and lupus patients need to be careful if they are on immunosuppressive medications if offered the polio vaccine. Usually the polio vaccines and others are taken care of during childhood. Additional vaccinations are not generally necessary.

As supported by this recent study using the influenza vaccine in patients studied in France, it has been shown that inactivated viral vaccines are effective, but larger amounts such as two doses can be used in lupus patients taking immunosuppressive medications or with low white blood cell counts. Lupus patients should be careful about live viral vaccines but they can take the usual flu vaccine and most other vaccines.