Chemo Offers No Reason to Skip the Flu Shot

BY SUSAN LONDON
Contributing Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Most patients with colorectal cancer have an immune response to the flu vaccine regardless of whether they are receiving chemotherapy and which drug regimen is used, according to the first study to look at the issue specifically in this population.

Dr. Ajithkumar Puthillath, a senior fellow in oncology at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, New York, and his colleagues conducted their study during the 2006-2007 flu season, enrolling outpatients with colorectal cancer who received the trivalent flu vaccine (Fluzone), which was designed to protect against the H1N1, H3N2, and B/Malaysia strains of the virus.

The 85 patients studied had a median age of 61 years. Slightly more than half were male (56%), and had metastatic disease (57%). Sixty-eight percent of the patients received cytotoxic chemotherapy within a month before and for up to 3 months after vaccination, he reported at a meeting on gastrointestinal cancers sponsored by the American Society of Clinical Oncology.

Overall, 71% of the patient population had an immune response to the vaccine, with no significant difference between those who received chemotherapy and those who did not (69% vs. 74%), Dr. Puthillath reported.

"The take-home message is that in colorectal cancer patients, especially in the community, flu vaccination should be offered to all patients irrespective of age and irrespective of chemotherapy use," said Dr. Puthillath, who reported that he had no conflicts of interest in association with the study. ■