FLU VACCINE

Recent Supply Shortages Underscore Ongoing Challenges

What GAO Found

The current vaccine shortage demonstrates the challenges to ensuring an adequate and timely flu vaccine supply. Only three manufacturers produce flu vaccine for the U.S. market, and the potential for future manufacturing problems such as those experienced both this year and to a lesser degree in previous years is still present. When shortages occur, their effect can be exacerbated by the existing distribution system. Under this system, health providers and vaccine distributors generally order a particular manufacturer's vaccine and have limited recourse, even for meeting the needs of high-risk persons, if that manufacturer's production is adversely affected. By contrast, providers who purchased vaccine from a different manufacturer might receive more of their order and be able to vaccinate their high-risk patients.

The current situation also reflects another concern: the nation lacks a systematic approach for ensuring that seniors and others at high risk for flu-related complications receive flu vaccine when it is in short supply. Once this year's shortage became apparent, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) took a number of steps to influence distribution patterns to help providers get some vaccine for their high-risk patients. These steps are still playing themselves out, and it will take more time to assess how well they will work. Problems have not been totally averted, however, as there have been media reports of long lines to obtain limited doses of vaccine and of high-risk individuals unable to find a flu vaccination in a timely fashion.

We shared the facts contained in this statement with CDC officials. They informed us they had no comments.