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WASHINGTON - The government is purchasing as many as 5 million additional doses of flu vaccine from plants in Canada and Germany to help relieve the U.S. shortage.

The Food and Drug Administration signed off on the vaccines' safety after inspecting the facilities where it was made. The officials also tested that the vaccines would be effective against the dominant flu strain expected in the United States and made sure it has been stored properly since it was made, Health and Human Services Department officials said Monday.

They spoke on condition of anonymity because HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson was not scheduled to announce the new vaccine doses until Tuesday.

Earlier Monday, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said she expected Thompson to announce the purchase this week.

"We do have optimism additional doses can be purchased," Dr. Julie Gerberding told delegates at the American Medical Association's annual winter meeting in Atlanta

The FDA has been working since October to arrange for additional flu shots, which were not made for U.S. consumption.

Canadian flu shot maker ID Biomedical has just over 1 million doses to sell to the United States, while British drug manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline Plc can provide 4 million doses from a German plant, Thompson said in October.

Separately, Illinois, New Mexico and New York City have located another 650,000 doses from drug wholesalers, but have not yet gotten FDA approval to purchase the vaccine for their residents.

The flu season is off to a slow start, with no widespread outbreak reported. But Gerberding cautioned health care officials to remain alert.

"A slow start doesn't necessarily reflect a slow season," she said. "The most common month of peak activity is February."

Health officials had planned to have more than 100 million doses of the vaccine this season, the biggest supply ever. But flu shot maker Chiron Corp. announced Oct. 5 that it could not ship its 48 million doses after British health officials suspended its license because of contamination at a Liverpool plant.

The resulting shortage is a major concern to AMA delegates, who have proposed resolutions to have the vaccine reach high-risk patients as a top priority, instead of on a first-come basis. The delegates were expected to vote on the resolutions before the meeting ends Tuesday.

However, Gerberding said, "The volunteerism works" as most Americans followed CDC guidelines for reserving the vaccine for high-risk patients.

"The people who should step aside stepped aside," she said, adding that she does not endorse penalizing healthy patients who are taking the vaccine.

About 61 million doses have been available this season, including a nasal vaccine only for healthy people ages 5-49. The CDC has said 98 million people, including 9 million children, need the vaccine.

Each year, the flu kills about 36,000 people in the United States and sends another 200,000 to the hospital.