

Text

[Print](#)

A Simple Way to Keep the Flu Away

You can avoid the flu this season by taking one simple step: Get a flu vaccination.

Unfortunately, some people think that getting a flu immunization is too much trouble or costs too much. Or, they swear that a flu immunization will make them sick or make them more likely to catch the flu -- or even colds.

Influenza -- the flu -- is caused by one of several strains of influenza viruses (type A or B) that infect the nose, throat and lungs, making life miserable for a week or two for many people -- and deadly for some. Flu season can peak anywhere from late December to early March, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Immunization facts

Your best defense against the flu is to get immunized. Depending on your age, you can do that in one of two ways:

- With a flu shot, given with a needle. This form of the vaccine contains killed virus and is approved for all people over the age of 6 months.
- With a nasal-spray vaccine. This form contains live, weakened flu viruses that cannot cause the flu. This form is approved for healthy, non-pregnant people ages 5 to 49 years.

A flu vaccination is most important for children 6 months and older; adults ages 50 and older; anyone with a chronic disease; anyone who lives in a nursing home or other long-term care site; health care workers; and people who are in frequent contact with the elderly or chronically ill. The CDC says children 8 years old and younger who are immunized for the first time should get two full doses of vaccine, one month apart.

Doctors also advise flu shots for women who plan to be pregnant during flu season. Flu shots are OK for breastfeeding mothers, the CDC says.

Even if you don't fall into one of the above groups, however, you are still a candidate for the vaccine if you want to avoid the flu.

Talk to your doctor first

Some people should not be vaccinated for the flu before talking to their health care provider, the CDC says. Talk to your doctor if:

- You have a severe allergy to chicken eggs
- You have had a severe reaction to a flu immunization in the past
- You developed Guillain-Barre syndrome within six weeks of a previous flu immunization

Children younger than 6 months of age should not be immunized against the flu, because the flu vaccines have not been approved for that age group.

If you are ill with a moderate or severe illness that includes a fever, you should wait to get vaccinated until your symptoms lessen, the CDC says.

Other prevention steps

Flu viruses are spread by contact with droplets sneezed or coughed from an infected person. Inhaling the droplets is the most common route to getting the flu, but many people also become infected by touching objects the droplets have landed on. You can spread the virus to others before you feel sick yourself. The CDC says you are infectious a day before symptoms begin and up to five days afterward.

You help protect yourself against the flu by doing simple things like washing your hands before eating and not putting your hands near your face or in your mouth. You don't need special cleansers when washing your hands; washing for 15 to 20 seconds with ordinary soap works fine. If someone in your family has the flu, you can keep surfaces clean of the virus by wiping them with a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water.

The other effective means of flu prevention is humidity. The flu bug exists in higher quantities in dry nasal and oral passages, which is one reason why flu epidemics occur in dry winter months. By raising the humidity in your workplace and at home to keep your nasal passages and mouth moist, your body will be better able to flush out the flu bug.

Rooting out rumors

Don't believe the rumor that a flu shot can give you even a mild case of influenza. It is impossible. Neither form of the vaccine -- by injection or nasal spray -- contains a form of the flu virus that can give you the flu. The injected form of the vaccine is made from particles of dead flu virus cells, and the nasal spray contains live viruses that have been damaged so they can't cause a major infection.

When you are injected with the flu vaccine, your body reacts as if it has been infected with the actual living virus and makes antibodies that provide immunity against the real virus. These antibodies remain at high levels for only six to nine months. These waning antibody levels are one reason why you need to be revaccinated each year.

The main reason you should be revaccinated yearly is that the flu virus is constantly changing and evolving into new strains. Each year the CDC attempts to predict which flu strain will be predominant. The CDC works with vaccine manufacturers to produce the specific vaccine that will combat the predicted strain.

If you are concerned about the cost of a flu immunization, check with your local health department for locations in your area where free flu shots are given.

Treating yourself at home

When you are exposed to the flu, the virus incubates for three to five days before symptoms begin. You probably have the flu if you come down with a high fever, sore throat, muscle aches and a cough (usually dry). The symptoms in children may also include vomiting, diarrhea and ear infections. Flu is usually self-treatable but has to run its course. You can treat symptoms by getting bed rest, drinking plenty of fluids, taking acetaminophen for aches and pains, and using a humidifier to keep nasal passages moist.

Expect the flu to last about five days, which is the time it takes your body to produce the antibodies that finally beat the infection. After that you will be protected from that strain of influenza for the rest of the season. Some people continue to feel ill and cough for more than two weeks. In some cases, the flu can make health conditions such as asthma or diabetes worse or lead to complications such as bacterial pneumonia. Adults older than 65 and people with chronic health conditions have the greatest risk for complications from the flu, the CDC says.

Four prescription drugs are available to treat the flu -- amantadine, rimantadine, zanamivir and oseltamivir -- but must be taken within the first two days of illness to be effective, the CDC says. They can reduce the length of time flu symptoms are present. These medications usually are used in hospital, nursing homes and other institutions where people are at high risk for complications of the flu. Talk to your health care provider if you think you should take one of these medications. These medications are not meant as

a substitute for vaccination.

Bird flu

You've probably heard or read news stories about the "bird flu." Avian, or bird, flu is a form of influenza caused by avian influenza viruses that infect birds, both wild and domestic. Avian flu viruses are all type A, and they are divided into forms that cause only a mild case of flu and those that cause severe cases. Chickens, ducks and other domestic poultry can become very sick and die from the forms of bird flu that cause severe symptoms.

Bird flu viruses usually do not infect humans. Flu experts are concerned because both the mild form and severe form of bird flu virus have spread from birds to humans. This first occurred in 1997. That year, a virus strain (H5N1) that causes severe infections was transferred to people in Hong Kong who had close contact with poultry, and six people died. Since then, H5N1 has spread to birds in Southeast Asia and Europe. But the spread of this virus from human to human has so far been rare, the CDC says. As of October 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) has reported confirmed cases in Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Humans have little or no immunity to this flu virus, making it difficult for people to fight off the infection. As of October 2005, WHO had recorded 121 confirmed cases of H5N1 infection in humans, with 62 deaths. If H5N1 should begin to spread easily from person to person, an extremely dangerous epidemic -- or even a worldwide pandemic -- would occur and millions of people would be expected to die. Clinical trials are underway on a vaccine to prevent this strain of flu. The antiviral medications used to treat the flu may also help prevent bird flu in humans, the CDC says.

No cases of bird flu in humans have been reported in the United States, and the CDC currently puts the risk to Americans as low.

The StayWell Company, LLC ©2018