

Preparing for Flu Season

Overview

Information about the flu and protecting yourself from the flu.

- The flu vaccine
- Protecting yourself against the flu

Every year 5 to 20 percent of the American public will get influenza, or the flu. In most cases, the flu lasts about a week and, though it can be miserable, it's not usually dangerous. But, in some cases, the flu can lead to very serious complications, particularly for the very young, the very old, and those who have certain health conditions. The best ways to protect yourself against the flu are to get vaccinated and practice good hygiene. In this article, you'll find information about the flu vaccine and protecting yourself against the flu.

The flu vaccine

Protecting yourself against the flu begins with getting vaccinated each fall. There are two types of vaccines:

- *The "flu shot"* is a vaccine that contains inactive strains of the flu virus and is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people older than 6 months, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions. A higher-strength flu shot is available for adults 65 years of age and older.
- *The nasal-spray flu vaccine* (sometimes called LAIV for "Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine") is made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu. LAIV is approved for use in *healthy* people 2 years to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies that protect against influenza viral infection develop. The flu vaccine does not cause the flu and is very safe. Most people have no reaction to the vaccine at all. However, some people experience a sore arm, fever, or sore muscles after getting the flu shot. The nasal spray vaccine could cause a runny nose, headache, cough, or sore throat.

It's important to realize that the flu vaccine can't provide 100 percent protection against the flu. There are three different types of flu virus, and these viruses can change from year to year. Each year, scientists decide well in advance of flu season which strains of the virus to include in the vaccine. Their decision is based on which strains of the flu they believe are most likely to show up that year. If their choice is right, the vaccine can be up to 90 percent effective in preventing the flu in healthy people under 65 years of age.

2 • Preparing for Flu Season

The vaccine is less effective in preventing the flu for people over the age of 65. However, getting the vaccine is still worthwhile because it can result in milder symptoms and lessen the likelihood of developing complications from the flu.

Who should get the flu vaccine?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/flu/) recommends that, with certain exceptions, everyone over the age of 6 months get the flu vaccine.

Because they have a higher risk of developing flu-related problems, or live with or care for people who have a higher risk, it is especially important that people in the following groups get vaccinated:

- adults 50 years of age and older
- residents of long-term-care facilities
- children and adults with chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, asthma, heart disease, or kidney disease
- pregnant women
- children from 6 months old until their nineteenth birthday
- people who live with or provide care to babies younger than 6 months old
- health care workers
- household contacts of people who have a higher risk for complications from the flu (such as caregivers of people over 65)

People who should **not** get the flu vaccine include the following:

- people who are allergic to chicken eggs
- people who have experienced a severe reaction to a previous flu shot
- people who developed Guillain-Barre Syndrome within 6 weeks of receiving a flu shot
- babies younger than 6 months old
- People who are ill with a fever at the time they are scheduled to receive the shot (If you would otherwise fall into a priority group as listed above, you should reschedule your vaccination as soon as you're recovered.)

Talk with your health care provider about when to get the vaccine and which type of vaccine is better for you. Flu season can begin as early as October but peaks in January.

Protecting yourself against the flu

In addition to getting vaccinated, you can also protect yourself against the flu by practicing good hygiene. Avoid close contact with those who are sick and be sure to wash your hands often. Also avoid touching your mouth, nose, and eyes. You can lessen the chances of passing the flu on to others by staying home when you are sick, disposing of used tissues carefully, and coughing or sneezing into the crook of your arm rather than your hands. Also teach children to cough into the crook of their arms and be sure they wash their hands frequently, too.

The best defense against any type of flu is to get vaccinated, take good care of yourself, avoid close contact with sick people, and wash your hands frequently. It is also important to stay aware of any flu outbreak situations in your country and follow carefully any related health advisories.

In some cases, a doctor may prescribe an antiviral drug if you were exposed to the flu or if you start showing flu-like symptoms. Antiviral drugs may help slow the reproduction of the flu virus in your body. They work most effectively if taken within two days of developing symptoms. People with underlying health conditions are more likely to be treated with antiviral medications.

Remember, too, that the program that provided this publication has helpful resources on work and personal concerns.

If you do get sick with the flu, get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids. If you have any respiratory problems, such as asthma, or if you're at risk for complications from the flu, visit your health care provider as soon as possible.

For more information about the flu, visit the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/flu or call 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). Concerned parents may also find helpful information on the American Academy of Pediatrics website at www.aap.org.

Written with the help of Deborah Borchers, M.D. Dr. Borchers is a primary care pediatrician in Ohio. She writes regularly for *Adoptive Families* magazine, and is a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Adoption, Foster Care and Kinship Care. Her fellowship training was in developmental disabilities.