

Protecting Yourself Against the Flu

» Tips for Staying Healthy

Influenza, more commonly known as the flu, is a respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Flu season can start as early as October and last as late as May.

Each year, millions of people in the United States — approximately 5% to 20% of the population — get the flu. More than 200,000 people are hospitalized with flu complications, and about 36,000 people die from the flu each year.

The flu is contagious. It is spread when droplets from a cough or sneeze are dispersed through the air to other people.

Otherwise healthy adults can spread the flu from 1 day before symptoms start to up to 5 days after they become sick. Children can pass along the flu for more than 7 days after they develop symptoms.

Flu Vaccinations

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have concluded that the best way to protect against the flu is to get vaccinated every year. There are two types of flu vaccines, an injection and a nasal spray.

The flu shot is given with a needle. The flu shot is “inactivated,” which means it contains killed virus. It is approved for anyone older than 6 months, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.

The nasal spray flu vaccine is made with live, weakened viruses that do not cause the flu. Healthy people ages 5 to 49 who are not pregnant may use the nasal spray vaccine.

In addition, the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) has recommended expanding the use of the nasal spray to healthy children ages 2 to 4 who do not have a history of asthma or recurrent wheezing.

Each vaccine contains three flu viruses, and the strains of virus that circulate in the United States change each year. The antibodies that protect against the flu develop about 2 weeks after vaccination.

Who Should Get Vaccinated?

Anyone who wants to protect themselves from the flu can get vaccinated. But ACIP does recommend that some people definitely get vaccinated every year:

- people who are at high risk for complications from the flu, including children 6 months to 5 years old, pregnant women, people 50 years or older, people with chronic medical conditions such as asthma or diabetes, and people who live in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities
- people who live with or care for people who are at high risk for complications from the flu
- health care workers.

Some people should not be vaccinated without first checking with a health care professional:

- people with a severe allergy to chicken eggs
- people who had a severe reaction to a prior flu vaccination
- people who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome within 6 weeks of getting a prior flu vaccination.

The flu vaccine is not approved for children younger than 6 months. Also, people with a moderate or severe illness accompanied by fever should wait to get their vaccine until the symptoms and fever go away.

Possible Side Effects

Minor side effects that may occur after getting a flu shot include soreness, redness or swelling at the site of the injection, a low-grade fever and body aches.

The viruses in the nasal spray vaccine are weakened, so it does not cause severe symptoms.

In children, side effects include runny nose, wheezing, headache, vomiting, muscle aches and fever. In adults, side effects include runny nose, headache, sore throat and cough.

In rare cases, flu vaccination may cause a severe allergic reaction.

Healthy Habits to Prevent Flu

To prevent the flu, you should also practice healthy habits every day. For example, stay home when you are sick, get plenty of sleep, cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, wash your hands often and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.

And if you are a smoker, quit now. Some research shows that smokers develop the flu more often than nonsmokers and that more smokers die from flu complications than nonsmokers. [NP](#)

Information is from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at www.cdc.gov.

Additional Notes:
