

# Flu Vaccine

## What is the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine can help keep you from getting the flu (influenza). Flu is an infection caused by a virus. It affects your whole body, especially your air passages, and causes symptoms that are similar to cold symptoms but more severe.

Most people with the flu feel sick for a few days and then get better. However, the flu sometimes leads to other infections, such as ear, sinus, and chest infections. Pneumonia can also occur as a result of the flu. It can be caused by the flu virus itself or by bacteria infecting lung tissues that have been damaged by the flu virus. Older adults, people whose immune systems are weak and people with chronic medical problems, such as heart or lung disease or diabetes, are at risk for more severe symptoms or problems if they get the flu. This is why it's important to try to prevent flu by getting the flu vaccine every year.

## How is the flu vaccine given?

The flu vaccine can be given as a shot in the arm or as a nasal spray. Shots contain dead virus while the spray contains a live but weakened virus. The nasal spray can be given only to:

- Healthy children over 2 years old
- Healthy adults who are not pregnant and who are 49 or younger

If you get the nasal spray vaccine, you should avoid contact with anyone at increased risk for complications from the flu for at least 1 week to make sure that you don't spread the live virus to them. This includes babies, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems or a chronic disease, such as diabetes. If you are thinking about getting the nasal spray, ask your provider if it is recommended for you.

## How does it work?

The vaccine exposes your immune system to the flu virus. The immune system is your body's defense against infection. Your body reacts to the dead or weakened flu virus by making special cells (antibodies) that can fight it.

The flu vaccine is usually about 70% effective in preventing flu. If you get the flu after getting the vaccine, you will not get as sick as you would have without the vaccine.

## Who should get the flu vaccine?

Adults and children 6 months or older should get the flu vaccine. This is especially important for people at high risk of serious flu complications, such as:

- Young children
- Pregnant women

- People with chronic health problems, like asthma, diabetes, heart or lung disease, or a weakened immune system
- People with certain muscle or nerve disorders, such as seizure disorders or cerebral palsy, that can lead to breathing or swallowing problems
- People 65 years old and older

The flu vaccine is also especially important for healthcare workers and others who live with or care for those who are at high risk of complications. The vaccine will help keep them from spreading the flu to the people they are caring for.

Most women who are pregnant should wait to get the vaccine until they have been pregnant for at least 13 weeks. However, if they have other chronic medical problems, it is OK to get the vaccine earlier in the pregnancy.

Talk with your healthcare provider before getting the vaccine if you:

- Are sick with a fever
- Had Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks after getting the flu vaccine
- Have ever had a severe allergic reaction to eggs or to a previous flu shot. Eggs are used in the process for making flu vaccine. Ask about the egg-free vaccine called FluBlok that is available for people ages 18 to 49.

It's OK to get the vaccine if you have a cold.

Thimerosal is a preservative used in some flu shots. Thimerosal contains mercury and can cause reactions in some people. Thimerosal-free vaccine is available if you are allergic to thimerosal or are concerned about its safety. The nasal flu vaccine does not contain thimerosal.

## **When should I get the flu vaccine?**

You should get a new flu vaccine every year. The effect of the vaccine wears off over time and is changed each year to protect against the flu virus strains that experts believe will be most active during the next flu season.

It's best to get the new vaccine as soon as it's available each year, before the start of flu season. However, if the vaccine is still available, it can be helpful to get it anytime during the flu season. Flu season usually starts in October and may last through May.

Flu seasons can vary from region to region. If you are at high risk for infection and plan to travel to an area where you might be exposed to the flu, make sure you have an up-to-date flu vaccination before you go on your trip.

## **What are the side effects of the vaccine?**

The flu vaccine can sometimes cause minor side effects, such as:

- Soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot was given
- Mild fever
- Body aches

If these problems occur, they start a few hours after the vaccination. They may last a day or two.

Serious problems from the flu vaccine, such as severe allergic reactions, are very rare. Signs of a serious allergic reaction can include breathing problems, hoarseness or wheezing, hives, paleness, weakness, a fast heartbeat, or dizziness. An allergic reaction may occur within a few minutes to a few hours after you get the vaccine. If you think you are having a reaction to the vaccine, call your healthcare provider right away. Tell your provider when you received the vaccine and what your symptoms are. If you are having trouble breathing or throat swelling, call 911.

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