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WELLNESS WEEKLY

Flu Shot: Influenza Vaccine & Side Effects

The influenza vaccine is the best way to prevent the flu, and flu prevention should be a goal for everyone. According to the CDC, up to 20% of Americans get the flu each year. More than 200,000 people in the U.S. are hospitalized each year, and about 3,000 to 49,000 deaths are flu-related.

When should I get a flu shot?

Because flu season may begin as early as October and run through May, the best time to get a flu shot is in September or October. It takes about two weeks for the flu shot to be effective. You can still get an influenza vaccine in December or later -- flu season lasts well into spring -- but the earlier in flu season you get it, the better your odds of staying flu free.

What types of flu shots or influenza vaccines are available?

There are four types of flu vaccines:

- The traditional flu shot. It's an injection into the muscle. It contains flu-virus particles that stimulate anti-flu immunity, but which cannot cause the flu.
- The high-dose flu shot approved for people age 65 and older. The ingredients are the same as the regular flu shot, but the dose is higher, as the aging immune system needs more help.
- An intradermal flu shot is approved for people age 18 to 64. This shot uses a tiny needle that only goes skin deep. It contains the same flu-virus particles as the traditional flu shot.
- Nasal-spray flu vaccine. It's approved for people age 2 to 49. This vaccine, called LAIV for live attenuated influenza vaccine, contains a live, weakened flu virus.

How does the influenza vaccine work to prevent flu?

Flu shots and the nasal flu vaccine work by causing antibodies to develop in your body. These antibodies provide protection against infection from the flu virus. This antibody reaction may cause fatigue and muscle aches in some people. Each year, the flu vaccine contains several different kinds of the virus. The strains chosen are the ones that researchers say are most likely to show up that year.

Who should get the flu shot?

An annual flu vaccination is recommended for everyone age 6 months and older. It's particularly advised for high-risk individuals who are more prone to flu complications, such as pneumonia.



Those at risk for complications include:

- All children 6 months to 18 years old
- People 50 years or older
- Women who will be pregnant during the flu season
- People who live in nursing homes
- Adults with chronic heart or lung conditions, including asthma, or any condition that weakens the immune system, such as diabetes
- Household contacts and caregivers, including baby sitters of any children younger than 5 years of age.
- Any person in close contact with someone in a high-risk group, such as health care workers and household contacts

Who should talk to their doctor before getting a flu shot?

According to the CDC, talk to your doctor before getting a flu shot if:

- You have had an allergic reaction to a flu shot in the past
- You have an allergy to eggs, as the influenza vaccine is grown in eggs. People with a severe egg allergy should not get the vaccine.
- You have previously had Guillain-Barre syndrome. Guillain-Barre syndrome is a disorder in which the body's immune system attacks part of the nervous system.
- You are ill. If you have a fever, talk to your health care provider about getting the shot later. If you have a mild illness with no fever, it's OK to get a flu shot.

What are some flu shot side effects?

You can experience soreness and/or swelling in your arm after getting a flu shot. Some have cold-like symptoms, including sniffles, headache, runny nose, sore throat, cough, and body aches for a day or two after getting the flu shot. In some cases, you may experience a low-grade fever. Serious side effects from the flu vaccine are very rare. If they do occur, it's within a few minutes to a few hours after getting the shot. It is important to note that the benefits of getting a flu shot far outweigh the risk of flu shot side effects.