Flu Infection and Flu Vaccines



The flu is a type of germ called a virus. It can get into the nose, throat, and lungs. Flu is short for influenza (in-floo-EN-zuh). Many people who get the flu recover well, yet sometimes it can cause severe illness and even death. Getting a flu shot can not only protect you but can also help you limit the spread of the flu to other people.

How do I know if I have the flu?

If you have the flu, you may have:

- Sudden fever.
- Muscle aches.
- Chills.
- Sore throat.
- Runny or stuffy nose.
- Headache.
- Red or itchy eyes.
- Dry cough.

You may also feel tired or weak. Many of these symptoms can be seen with other viral infections including COVID-19. It is important to get tested if you suspect you have it. You may need treatment with medicine for the flu or COVID-19, but these medicines must be started in the first few days of illness to be effective.

What is the flu vaccine?

There are different types of flu viruses and they are always changing every season. They are grouped as Flu A and Flu B strains. Vaccines are designed to target both types in one dose. There are several available flu shots, including a new FDA-approved one for use in adults age 50 years or older.

The flu vaccine can protect you against the flu virus. The vaccine stimulates the body's immune system to make helpful antibodies to help prevent more serious infections. There are two types of vaccines:

- The flu "shot" is given in the arm. ***The flu shot is made using dead viruses so it cannot make you sick with the flu.*** The shot can be given to people over 6 months of age.
- The nasal flu vaccine (FluMist) is made from weakened live (attenuated) virus. It is squirted into the nose and may cause mild symptoms such as a runny nose or congestion for a few days. It is recommended only for healthy, non-pregnant people between 2 and 49 years. FluMist Home is available in 48 states in many pharmacies and on-line ordering, allowing adults ages 18-49 to self-administer the nasal vaccine and parents to give it to children ages 2-17.

A person can still take a flu vaccine (egg-based or non egg-based) even if there is a history of egg allergy.

Who should receive a flu vaccine?

Flu can be serious. Flu vaccines can help prevent:

- you from getting infected with the flu.
- you from getting seriously ill from the flu.
- spreading the flu to others.

All people older than six months of age are recommended to get an annual flu shot. This includes healthy people as well as those at higher risk for serious illness, including:

- Adults who are over 50 years old or have chronic health problems (such as lung or heart disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS), live in a nursing home, live with or take care of babies less than six months old, or who are health care workers.
- All children over six months old, especially those with chronic health problems or who are taking aspirin. The first season a child needs two doses of vaccine 4 weeks apart.
- Women who are or will be pregnant during the flu season. Women in the third trimester (last 3 months of pregnancy) may want to get the vaccine before the baby is born to help protect the baby.

Are flu shots safe?

Flu shots are extremely safe. After a flu shot, you might have a sore arm, feel tired, or have other mild side effects as your immune system engages, but this means our immune system is working, not that you are sick. If you have any concerns about flu shot safety or effectiveness, talk about those concerns with your healthcare provider, who is your partner in health.

What else can I do to prevent the flu?

- Wash your hands often and well. Use soap and water or a hand sanitizer.
- Avoid being near people who are sick.

- Keep a physical distance of at least six feet to limit your exposure from someone who is coughing or sneezing.
- In situations where exposure risk could be high during flu season (like crowded indoor spaces), wear a high-quality mask (N95, KN95, KF94 or 3-ply medical mask), which can help limit the spread of the virus.
- Keep good control of medical problems, such as asthma.
- Do not smoke or vape and avoid being around any tobacco smoke or vapors.

What should I do if I get sick with the flu?

- Treat signs of flu with medicines that relieve pain and fever (such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen). Never give a child aspirin without first speaking to your doctor.
- Ask your doctor about prescription medicines specific for the flu that can help fight against the flu and help with your flu symptoms. These medicines should be started soon after the flu is diagnosed with the first signs of infection.
- Rest as much as possible.
- Drink plenty of liquids.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you sneeze or cough and throw away the tissue afterward. Wash your hands often and well.
- Stay home from work or school to keep from giving others the flu.

Can I get a flu vaccine at the same time as the vaccine for COVID-19 or RSV?

Yes, the flu vaccine can be given at the same time as the COVID-19 or the RSV vaccine. Remember to get your flu vaccine before or early in the flu season, as the shot takes a few weeks to start working. It is important to get all recommended vaccines to protect yourself and those around you from these serious illnesses. If you are unsure, talk to your healthcare provider about which vaccines are advised for you given your age and health.

Where can I get the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine is available many places including pharmacies and medical clinics. Sometimes it is offered in health fairs as well.

You don't usually need a prescription to get a flu vaccine (though some places will not give it to young children who have to go to a clinic).

If you are unsure where to get it, you can check with your primary care provider or lung specialist. Some people can use the nasal vaccine that is available for home administration.

How can I tell if I have the flu or another viral infection like COVID or RSV?

Flu viruses and many other viruses like Respiratory Synctial Virus (RSV) and the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 spread easily and are often around at the same times of the year. They all can cause a range of infection from mild to severe life-threatening illness. Symptoms of flu and COVID-19 are very similar. It is possible to have infection from more than one virus at the same time.

Testing (with a home kit or at a testing site or clinic) can help see if you have flu or COVID in order to get the right medication early to treat, particularly if you are at high risk of severe infection. People can spread these viruses before they have symptoms and, in some cases, even without symptoms.

Be careful to limit your exposure to flu and other viruses. Be sure to wash your hands well and often. If you are sick, call your healthcare provider before going to a clinic or ED to plan your visit. If you are sick and need to go out, wear a high-quality mask to prevent the spread of germs to those around you.

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Additional Resources:

American Thoracic Society
https://site.thoracic.org/advocacy-patients/patient-resources
- COVID-19 and Lung Health
- How Vaccines Work to Prevent Infections
- RSV in Adults
- RSV in Babies and Children
- RSV Prevention

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)
https://www.cdc.gov/flu/

National Foundation for Infections Disease (NFID)
https://www.nfid.org/infectious-disease/flu/

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V5-10.28.26