

An Annual Flu Shot is Your Best Defense

If you are at high risk of getting the flu, your first line of defense is an annual flu shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend flu shots for children ages 6 months to 2 years and for older adults age 50 and older. These people are considered at high risk for complications from influenza. Also, get vaccinated if you are a police officer or firefighter.

Other people who should get flu shots are those who:

- Are residents of a nursing home or other chronic-care facility
- Have a chronic disorder such as diabetes or heart, kidney or lung conditions; these people are three times more likely to die of the flu than those without these conditions.
- Have a weakened immune system from infection with HIV, leukemia, or medications you take following an organ transplant.
- Will be in your second or third trimester of pregnancy during flu season.
- Work in a health care facility where you are more likely to be exposed to the flu.

The best time to be immunized is between mid-October and mid-November. This allows your immunity to peak during the height of the flu season. Adults receive the vaccine in one injection. It takes two weeks after you've been vaccinated for the shot to take effect.

But the flu vaccine is not foolproof. Its effectiveness varies from year to year and from person to person. Since the strains used in the vaccine are chosen nine months before a particular flu season, there is a slight chance the strains may change before the flu season actually starts.

In addition, if you're young and healthy, the vaccine may be 70 to 90% effective in preventing illness. For an older adult or someone with a chronic medical condition, the vaccine may not be as protective. Still, for older adults who are at high risk, a flu shot can reduce hospitalizations by as much as 70% and deaths by 85%.

You may worry about contracting the flu from the vaccine. But the vaccine is made from an inactivated form of the virus, so you can't get the flu from a flu shot.

In some cases, however, you may have a slight reaction to the shot, such as soreness at the injection site, mild muscle aches or fever beginning six to 24 hours after you have been immunized.

If you are allergic to eggs, you probably shouldn't have a flu shot. Because the viruses are grown in chicken eggs, you may have an allergic reaction. If you are pregnant, wait until after your first trimester to be immunized, unless your doctor advises you otherwise.

If you come down with the flu, these measures may help ease your symptoms:

- Drink plenty of liquids to avoid dehydration.
- Get more sleep.
- Try chicken soup. It's not just good for your soul, it can help by breaking up congestion.

Use an over-the-counter pain reliever such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) cautiously, but as needed. Remember, pain relievers may make you more comfortable, but they won't make your symptoms go away any faster and may have serious side effects.