

Flu Shots (Influenza Vaccine)

What are flu shots?

When you get a flu shot you are injected in the arm with the influenza vaccine. The vaccine helps protect adults and children from getting influenza (flu).

The influenza virus is always present somewhere in the world. In the United States flu outbreaks tend to occur each year between November and March.

Influenza causes a coldlike upper respiratory infection. Unlike most colds, however, the flu often causes fever, muscle aches, and dizziness. It can also lead to more serious infections, such as pneumonia. Complications from flu cause up to 40,000 deaths per year in the U.S. These deaths usually occur in the elderly and in people with chronic health problems, such as heart disease and severe asthma.



How do they work?

The formula for the flu vaccine is changed every year according to the recommendations of scientists from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). They predict which strains of flu virus are most likely to appear the next winter. The virus in the flu vaccine has been inactivated, or "killed." This means you cannot catch the flu from getting a shot. Getting the shot introduces part of the flu virus to your immune system. Your body then reacts by making protective antibodies against the virus.

How effective are they?

Flu shots appear to be about 70% effective in preventing the flu. Even if you do get the flu, the vaccine helps protect against severe infection. For this reason it is said that the flu shot protects against death from the flu more than from flu itself.



The flu vaccine becomes effective 2 to 4 weeks after you get the shot. It is best to get the flu shot in October of each year. Try to get it no later than November, if possible.

What are the side effects?

Eggs are used in the production of flu vaccine. If you are allergic to eggs, you may have a severe allergic reaction to the flu shot. **The flu shot should not be taken by anyone who has a history of severe egg allergy.**

Some manufacturers also recommend not getting a flu shot if you have an allergy to thimerosal. **Thimerosal** is a preservative used in contact lens solutions and the flu vaccine.

For people who do not have egg or thimerosal allergies, the flu vaccine has infrequent, minor side effects. The most common reaction is some soreness at the site of the shot. A few people develop fever or muscle aches within a few hours of the injection. These symptoms may last 1 to 2 days.

There have been no reports of flu shot complications affecting the nervous system since the 1976-1977 swine flu epidemic.

Who should get a flu shot?

Several groups of people should receive the flu shot every year:

- ◆ people over the age of 50
- ◆ people whose immune systems may be impaired, such as by HIV, cancer, or an organ transplant
- ◆ people with chronic medical problems, such as asthma, heart disease, emphysema, and diabetes
- ◆ people working in health care
- ◆ school teachers and other community workers with close, daily contact with the public.



Flu shots can be helpful for anyone who is not severely allergic to eggs.

Developed by McKesson Clinical Reference Systems.

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