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Should I get a flu shot? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Since winter is approaching soon and it is the time for sniffles and sneezing, what do you think about getting a FLU SHOT as an ounce of prevention?

— Achoo, cough, cough

Answer

Dear Achoo, cough, cough,

To get the shot or not, that is the question... The flu season typically starts in October and ends around March, with the peak month being February. You can get the flu vaccine anytime during the flu season. For most people, the benefits of getting a flu shot far outweigh the concerns. Plus, it's helpful to know that you can't get the flu from the flu shot!

There are two types of flu vaccines: the injection and the nasal spray. Injectable flu vaccines usually contain inactivated strains of types A and B flu virus and help your body to provide immunity to these two common strains of the flu. The nasal spray vaccine contains a live but weakened version of the same strains. Any immunity from these vaccines is short-lived; with the predominant influenza virus strain(s) changing each year, the flu shot must be administered annually to continue protection. Further, the protection you do get doesn't kick in until about two weeks after getting the vaccine. Because of the yearly differences in flu virus strains, annual studies are conducted to determine how well it worked to prevent illness; it currently stands at about 40 to 60 percent effective against influenza (though there are a few factors to consider that can impact effectiveness ^[2]). What this implies is that while a person reduces their individual risk of getting the flu after having received the vaccine for that year, it's still possible to get sick from the illness — but it will likely be milder as compared to not having been vaccinated.

Given that the flu vaccine is in short supply during some flu seasons, it's recommended that folks in certain populations get vaccinated first or earlier in the season. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) [3] advise that these groups of people get the flu vaccine since they're at increased risk for serious complications from the flu, including pneumonia, hospitalizations, and death:

- Individuals who are aged 50 years and older. While they can get a regular flu shot, there are also vaccines designed specifically for those who are 65 and older, and it's advised that they don't receive the nasal vaccine.
- Folks with chronic medical conditions (such as heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, asthma, kidney disease, chronic anemia or other blood disorder, endocrine disorder, immunosuppressed conditions, and other conditions that impact pulmonary function)
- Children 6 months to 4 years old
- Those who will be pregnant and up to 2 weeks postpartum (i.e., after delivery) during flu season
- Alaska Natives and American Indians
- Anyone with a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or more
- Anyone 6 months to 18 years of age who is prescribed aspirin or salicylate medications

In addition, health care workers, household members or other close contacts, and employees of nursing homes, chronic care facilities, assisted living, and other similar residences are urged to get the vaccine because their close contact with individuals at risk may cause inadvertent transmission of the influenza virus.

Not everyone is eligible for the influenza vaccine, however. Some may develop serious side effects from getting it. It's wise to consult with a health care provider *first* if you:

- Have a severe allergy to eggs or egg products
- Previously experienced an allergic reaction to the influenza vaccine
- Are currently feeling ill
- Have a history of [Guillain-Barre syndrome](#) [4], a rare paralytic illness

If you do get the flu vaccine, the most common side effect is some mild swelling, redness, and soreness around the area of the injection, which can last one to two days. It's also possible to experience headaches, muscle aches, nausea, or develop a fever within a few days after getting the vaccine. If any of these do develop though, they'll likely be mild and go away on their own. Despite these possible side effects, getting the vaccine is much less dreary than getting a full-fledged case of the flu. Other adverse effects are allergic reactions and the development of Guillain-Barre syndrome, but this condition is extremely uncommon (occurring in about one to two cases per one million people who receive the vaccine).

To learn more, you can check out the CDC's [Influenza information](#) [5]. You can also reach out to your health care provider to ask questions about your risk for the flu and to get vaccinated. And while the vaccine is the best way to prevent the seasonal flu, combining the vaccine with other healthy habits can further decrease your risk of contracting the flu. Some actions you can take include avoiding close contact with people who are sick, staying home when you're sick, covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, washing your hands with soap and water

(scrubbing for at least 20 seconds), and avoiding touching your eyes, nose, and mouth as much as possible.

Here's hoping you now have some more information to consider your vaccination options this season!

Alice!

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