



# THE FAMILY PHARMACIST

A QUICK READ FOR YOUR OTC NEED!

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## INFLUENZA IMMUNIZATION 2020-2021: SHOULD I GET A FLU SHOT?

There is nothing in this newsletter that you wouldn't be able to find on your own, given the plethora of information on the Internet about influenza. Having said that, the purpose of this issue is to condense information that is available from many sources into one place to help you make an informed decision about protecting yourself from an influenza infection this season.

So, is the flu shot a *safe* and *effective* way to protect yourself from the flu this year? Especially since you've probably heard on the news that it's more important to get a flu shot this year than in the past. Is that true? And why?

There is so much misinformation about vaccination floating around out there that it is frustrating even for health professionals. Think of it this way: Given everything that has happened in 2020, suppose another disaster strikes. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, etc. In the event that you might be herded into a public safe haven with hundreds of other people seeking shelter and relief, you will be exposed to many infectious diseases and other dangerous conditions. Why would you not want to be up to date on *all* immunizations, like pertussis (whooping cough), diphtheria, and tetanus? Not to mention flu, pneumonia (two shots), and hepatitis A. Some people are concerned that too many immunizations can overload the immune system. But this is simply not true. Vaccines are a negligible antigen challenge to our immune system compared to what we are exposed to in the environment every day. The benefits from vaccination far outweigh any risks. In 2010 in California, the US saw its worst whooping cough outbreak in over 50 years among unvaccinated children, resulting in 9,120 cases and 10 deaths, from a totally preventable disease!

**Timing.** You should get the flu vaccine in September or by the end of October. However, according to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), "vaccination should continue to be offered

as long as influenza viruses are circulating locally and unexpired vaccine is available." Right now is a good time to get vaccinated, because it takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection against influenza virus infection. Given the pandemic, it's more important than ever to get a flu vaccine—even though it *won't protect against COVID-19*. But you don't want to run the risk of getting both viruses at the same time. Immunization for influenza may help avoid a doctor's office or emergency room visit for flu, which can lighten the healthcare load—and might reduce your *exposure* to COVID-19. Of course, you don't need to get in to see your doctor to get a flu shot. Pharmacies, acute care clinics, health departments, etc., all allow walk-ins for flu immunization. Wherever you get the shot, they will know to give you the vaccine that fits your age and medical needs. You don't need to remember technical details about which flu shot to ask for.

**Safety.** Like any medical product, vaccines can cause side effects. This is a calculated risk that we take every time we use a medication, get a laboratory test, or undergo a medical procedure. Common side effects from the flu shot are known, mild, and short-lived. Soreness, redness and/or swelling at the site of the shot; headache, fever, nausea, and muscle aches are common complaints. One serious adverse reaction that should be mentioned is Guillain-Barre' syndrome. This is a very rare condition in which the body's immune system attacks the nervous system, leading to weakness and paralysis. Here's what the CDC says about that: "Some studies have found a possible small association of injectable flu vaccine with Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS). Overall, these studies estimated the risk for GBS after vaccination as fewer than 1 or 2 cases of GBS per one million people vaccinated. Other studies have not found any association. GBS also, rarely, occurs after flu illness. Even though GBS following flu illness is rare, GBS is more

common following flu illness than following flu vaccination. GBS has not been associated with the nasal spray vaccine."

**Effectiveness.** The CDC claims "that flu vaccination reduces the risk of flu illness by between 40% and 60% among the overall population during seasons when most circulating flu viruses are well-matched to the flu vaccine." For the previous 2019-2020 flu season, the adjusted vaccine effectiveness for all age groups was 39% against the most common influenza viruses. The vaccine showed the highest effectiveness in the 50-64 year old age group, 42%. While these percentages might appear to be low, consider that many factors influence vaccine effectiveness, like a serious medical condition. But even so, the ability to reduce your chance of getting the flu by 39% is significant. And even if you get the flu, studies show that patients who are vaccinated tend to have milder symptoms. A 2018 study published in the journal, *Vaccine*, showed that among adults hospitalized with flu, vaccinated patients were 59 percent less likely to be admitted to the ICU than those who had not been vaccinated. This season, 2020-2021, experts expect the vaccine to confer about the same immunity as last year.

**Additional Information.** The most reliable website for influenza information is the CDC. The CDC is a US federal agency and a national public health institute that mainly focuses on preventing and controlling infectious diseases, like the flu. For valid reasons *not* to get the flu vaccine, and other frequently asked questions about the flu, see the link below.

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/season/faq-flu-season-2019-2020.htm>

### My recommendation:

Get the flu shot as soon as possible and before October 31, if you can. Your immunity should last through spring of 2021. As of the date on this newsletter,

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flu incidence in the US is low. Some have suggested that precautions that are being taken to prevent COVID-19 are proving successful in keeping influenza under control. This may be true, however, it is very early in the season and typically flu peaks in January and February. So we shouldn't let our guard down. Get the shot!

Influenza Vaccine Myths And Facts	
Myth	Fact
The flu shot can cause the flu	Flu vaccines cannot cause the flu. They are either weakened viruses (nasal spray flu vaccine), or inactivated viruses (since viruses aren't living, inactivated is as good as dead). Some flu vaccines are <i>recombinant</i> (meaning that they use DNA to make a surface protein found on flu viruses rather than the weakened or inactivated disease-causing virus) to mount an immune response against the flu.
The flu shot doesn't even work	It is true that the vaccine is not 100% effective. But it does significantly reduce your chances of getting the flu. And if you get the flu, you're symptoms are likely to be milder if you have been vaccinated.
Vaccines can cause autism	There is absolutely no good scientific evidence that this is true.
Vaccines in general don't work	Vaccines have saved countless lives since the first use of the smallpox vaccine in 1796. The numbers for lives saved and reduced disability because of vaccination is undeniable and staggering. The benefit of vaccine use cannot be underestimated.
I don't need the vaccine, I never get sick	Depending on your overall state of health, this may be true. However, you can still carry the virus and expose other susceptible people (like children and the elderly) and anyone whose immune system may not be as strong as yours.
I can't afford the flu shot	Out of pocket cost for the flu shot ranges from \$17 to \$65 at pharmacies and acute care clinics, depending on the one you need for your age. City and county health departments and some local hospitals have provisions for people who cannot afford to pay anything. Check with a local municipal clinic for assistance. According to the US Department of Health & Human Services, flu vaccines are required to be covered by your health insurance without charging a copayment or coinsurance. But some insurances will make you go to your doctor or a specific location. Check with your plan. Medicare covers the shot for seniors.
The flu isn't that serious	Flu can cause mild to severe symptoms, and at times can lead to death. Even in an otherwise healthy person, the flu can produce disabling symptoms resulting in lost time at work (or school) and unnecessary medical bills.
Babies get too many vaccines, it can't be good	All children over six months of age should get the flu shot. Even if a child gets other immunizations at the same time, modern vaccines contain the fewest antigens necessary to be effective, and the antigenic challenge to the infant is negligible.
Vaccines contain toxic chemicals like mercury	Thimerosal (a mercury chemical <i>preservative</i> ) was removed from <i>all</i> infant vaccines in 2001. Flu vaccines in multiple dose vials (used to draw more than one shot) may contain thimerosal to safeguard against contamination of the vial. Single-dose vials and pre-filled syringes of the flu shot and the nasal spray flu vaccine <i>do not contain a preservative</i> because they are intended to be used once.
Pregnant women should not get the flu vaccine	Only one vaccine, FluMist,™ the live, nasal spray flu vaccine, should <i>not</i> be used in pregnant women. The US Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (part of the CDC) states that all other available vaccines (inactivated or recombinant) that are appropriate for a woman's age are acceptable and can be given at any time during pregnancy.
The flu shot will protect me against COVID-19	The flu shot will <i>only</i> protect against influenza. As of the writing of this newsletter, there is no vaccination for COVID-19.