



THE FAMILY PHARMACIST

A QUICK READ FOR YOUR OTC NEED!

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INFLUENZA IMMUNIZATION 2022-2023

By now, we're probably all tired of hearing about vaccines and vaccinations. And it's unfortunate that immunizing ourselves against disease by vaccination has become a political issue rather than remain a medical one over the last two and one-half years. Of course, deciding to accept any medical intervention, including a vaccine, is a very personal decision. Ever since widespread vaccination began in the early 1800s there has been controversy over the need for vaccination. Convincing the public of the safety of vaccination has always been a challenge for public health officials. Whatever you decide, the information presented below is simply to help you make up your mind.

Flu circulates in the US usually between October and May each year. So what's new with flu vaccines for the 2022-2023 season? Many flu vaccines are available this season. All are *quadrivalent*, which means they protect against four different flu viruses. But you shouldn't have to worry about that. Your doctor or other health care provider will tell you which flu shot is appropriate for your age and medical condition. A flu shot this season is either *inactivated*, *recombinant*, or *live*. What's the difference?

Inactivated vaccines. Most flu vaccines are *inactivated*. There are several ways to inactivate a vaccine. An inactivated (or "killed") virus is one that cannot replicate. So you can't get the flu from an inactivated flu vaccine, but it will stimulate your immune system to produce antibodies against the flu virus if you are exposed. Some inactivated flu vaccines are egg-based, but not all.

Recombinant Vaccine. This method does not require an egg-grown vaccine virus and does not use chicken eggs in the production process. It's a completely synthetic method. Scientists use the gene that makes a surface protein found on influenza viruses to trigger the immune system to target the real virus. There is one recombinant flu shot (Flublok® Quadrivalent) available for the 2022-2023 influenza season. And it's one of the preferred ones for people over 65. It is also *not* possible to get the flu from a recombinant influenza vaccine.

Live vaccine. One vaccine, FluMist®, is a weakened (also known as *attenuated*) form of the flu virus. FluMist® is administered as a spray into each nostril, so no needles. Even though it is weakened, it is a live vaccine and it is only for healthy, non-pregnant patients. This nasal spray flu vaccine is also made with

egg-based technology. It has not been studied for people with severe asthma or active wheezing. It's approved for ages 2 to 49 years of age. There is a long list of people who should *not* get this vaccine. Choose FluMist® only if your doctor specifically recommends it for you or your child.

Who should get a flu shot? The flu shot is recommended for *everyone 6 months of age or older*. Also, in light of COVID-19, it's more important than ever to get a flu vaccine. It's been demonstrated that preventing flu can conserve healthcare resources by reducing the risk of illness, hospitalizations, and death.

Which flu shot should I get? Children six months through 8 years of age *who have never had a flu shot*, should get two doses at least four weeks apart. Check with your pediatrician. Up to age 64, your provider will advise you on the appropriate shot for you, usually an inactivated, standard-dose vaccine. Vaccines preferred for 65 and older are the high-dose Fluzone® (an inactivated vaccine), Flublok® (the recombinant vaccine), or Flud® (inactivated, *adjuvanted* flu vaccine). *Adjuvanted* means that an ingredient has been added to boost the immune response.

When should I get the flu vaccine? In the US, you should get your flu shot by the end of October. Getting the shot by the end of October will provide protection that will last throughout the flu season.

Can flu vaccines be given with other vaccines? Yes, inactivated flu vaccines can be given with other vaccines but should be given in separate limbs. If you're over 65 and getting an *adjuvanted* flu vaccine (Flud®) you might not want to get the Shingles shot at the same time. It could cause more side effects. Any flu vaccine can be given at the same time with COVID-19 vaccines, as long as you get the shots in different arms.

Can you get the flu vaccine if you're sick? If the illness is mild, the CDC recommends still getting the shot rather than miss an opportunity to get vaccinated. But in moderate to severe illness it's better to wait until your symptoms are improved.

Can immunocompromised people receive the flu vaccine? Check with your doctor on this one. You should get vaccinated, but your doctor can help you decide on the standard-dose or the high-dose vaccine. The CDC says that immunocompromised patients may receive any licensed, *injectable* flu vaccine that your provider recommends.

How effective is the vaccine in preventing flu? It's too early to know the effectiveness of the vaccine for the 2022-2023 season. In past years, flu vaccine effectiveness has ranged between 40 to 60%. It varies among age groups, but last season averaged around 35% effectiveness. While this seems low, remember that reducing your chance of getting the flu by even one-third is significant. And even if you get the flu, vaccinated people tend to have milder symptoms and are less likely to be admitted to a hospital. Influenza vaccination reduces the risk of severe flu and death, even when the vaccine is not perfectly matched with any particular year's flu strains. COVID-19 shots have a much higher effectiveness, but that's because influenza and COVID-19 are different viruses. So don't compare.

Can pregnant or nursing women get the vaccine? Yes, pregnant women can get any *injectable* flu vaccine and, according to the CDC, flu vaccine is safe while breastfeeding. If you're pregnant, always check with your doctor.

What if I have an egg allergy? Ask your provider about egg-free flu vaccines. At least two are available. Flucelvax® is approved for anyone over 6 months, and Flublok® is available for adults over 18 years of age.

Should unvaccinated people who already had the flu this year still get the flu vaccine? Yes. It's advisable to get the shot even if you've had flu this season. The current vaccines may protect against other circulating flu viruses.

Summary. The bottom line is that influenza vaccination has a good chance of protecting you from the flu during the 2022-2023 flu season. A surge in cases of flu in Australia, where winter is just ending, suggests a similar rise in the coming flu season in the US. If you decide to get vaccinated, get it as soon as possible by the end of October. Don't be too concerned about which vaccine to get, rely on your health care provider to suggest the one appropriate for your age and medical condition. If you do get influenza in spite of being vaccinated, you will be less likely to get severely ill, or be admitted to the hospital or the ICU.

References on file
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