

Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

The Flu (Influenza) Vaccine

Unfortunately there is no specific cure or medicine for the flu. So the best approach is prevention by a flu shot or vaccine. Each year a different strain or type of influenza virus arrives, often from Asia. In most cases, we can accurately predict which strains will arrive each season and prepare a vaccination to prevent that specific infection. Usually the vaccine contains 3 different strains of the virus. Because the virus strains change every flu season, a different vaccination is needed every year. In other words, last year's vaccine will not protect against this coming season's strain of influenza virus. This is why the vaccine needs to be given every year.

The flu vaccine is usually given in the fall season, sometime between October and December, so people can be protected during the typical flu season (January to March.) It takes up to 2 weeks for the vaccine to take effect and the protection lasts for about 6 months. Children less than 9 years of age receiving the flu vaccine for the first time need two shots, at least one month apart. Everyone else needs only one shot. It is also important to note that the vaccine will not give you the flu. It is a killed vaccine (not a live one) and will not cause an influenza infection.

The influenza vaccine is generally quite safe. Most people either have no side effects or experience local redness, swelling or soreness at the site of the injection. Some people may complain of body aches and/or fever for a day or two following the injection. For more details on the possible side effects of the flu vaccine, speak with your healthcare professional.

In children, the flu vaccine is about 80 to 90% effective in preventing influenza infection and about 62 to 73% effective in preventing illness with fever. The flu vaccine is effective in preventing hospitalizations and even death among seniors. However, even if a vaccinated person does develop the flu, it will be much milder than if he or she had not received the vaccine.

There are a few important points to keep in mind:

- The flu vaccine protects only against the influenza virus.
- It is still possible to contract the flu even after having been vaccinated.
- The vaccine will not prevent a cold caused by other viruses. So if someone gets a cold after having been vaccinated, it does not mean the vaccine did not work.

It is recommended that the following "high-risk groups" receive a flu shot:

- healthy children between 6-23 months of age
- the elderly
- persons of any age with chronic medical conditions

Also, persons in contact with children less than 24 months old (including parents and other caregivers) as well as healthcare providers and those with daily contact with high-risk individuals should also receive the flu shot.

However, because the flu is not just like a cold but potentially more serious, all healthy children and adults are encouraged to receive the flu vaccine every year.

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