

Flu Vaccines: Questions and Answers

Question 1 — Does the flu shot give me the flu?

Does the flu shot give me the flu? I heard people get sick after the shot.

Answer

Well, I'm really glad you asked that question about the flu shot because it's something that a lot of people wonder about.... I've had patients ask me this question many times before and it's actually a common misconception for a couple of reasons

- Number 1 – you can't get the flu from the flu shot because it's a dead virus so all of the flu vaccines that we give on the market now are given by injection so you get a shot in your arm when you get the flu shot and those viruses are actually dead so you cannot, it's not even possible to contract the flu from the flu shot, but there seems to be misconceptions that still swirl around because...a couple of reasons...first is that it takes about 2 weeks before you can develop immunity to the flu after you have received your flu vaccine.... So it's possible that you come into contact with somebody you know at work or one of your kids who might have contracted the flu and they can give you the flu before you've actually developed the immunity from the vaccine.
- Another reason, sometimes people feel like they might be getting the flu from the flu shot is because there are other illnesses that are similar to the flu that a person can get and think they've actually contracted the flu when it's another illness entirely.

So good news is you cannot get the flu from the flu shot and you should be getting your flu shot to protect yourself, every season.

Question 2 — Do I need a flu shot; I've the pneumonia shot?

Do I need a flu shot if I've already had a pneumonia shot?

Answer

That's a great question. Flu and pneumonia can both cause similar illnesses so it's easy to kind of wonder... do I really need both vaccines to protect myself and the answer to that question is yes. The reason for that is that the flu vaccine protects against the influenza virus whereas the pneumonia or pneumococcal vaccine, as

it's called, protects against a bacteria called streptococcus pneumoniae. Both of those, the virus and the bacteria can cause pneumonia so it's very important if you have illnesses such as lung disease, if you're a smoker...if you've got other chronic illnesses or if you're older than 65 years of age that you make sure that you get your flu vaccine every year and that you get your pneumonia vaccine when you're eligible for it and you can talk to your health care provider about when you should do that.

Question 3 —Why is it new every year?

Why is there a new flu vaccine every year?

Answer

Great question.....we don't have any other vaccine that we have to get every single year so people ask all the time why is it that we have a new one every year and why do I have to go back and get another flu vaccine every single year. Couple reasons for that:

- First of all the flu virus is always changing so what is active in the environment and what is making people sick one year may be a completely different type of virus that's making people sick the following year. So every year the flu vaccine is reviewed to make our best educated guess as to which viruses and which types we think will be circulating in the upcoming flu season. So the vaccine may be updated and if you received last year's vaccine you might not have protection against the viruses that are going to be circulating this season.
- The other reason to get a flu shot every year is that our immunity doesn't stay the same over time once you get your flu vaccine you will have immunity that kind of drops off a little bit over time so if you only get say one flu vaccine and you don't go for several more years without getting a vaccine your immunity will be less than it was when you first got your shot. So the best thing to do is to get a flu vaccine every year because number one you'll have the vaccine that is most closely matched to those viruses that you may actually catch that season and number two your immunity will be at the optimal level and you'll be more likely to fight off the flu if you encounter it, um, in someone you know.

Question 4 —When should I get the flu shot?

If I get a flu shot in October, will it last until the end of the flu season?

Answer

So there's been several news reports, mostly last fall, that we're talking about, ya know, is it really too early to get your flu shots say in late August or early September. There are ads that typically come out that time of year, pharmacies and other health care providers may be saying hey you know the flu shot is available, come in and get your flu shot and really according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that is perfectly fine to do. Their recommendation is to get the flu shot as soon as it's available every year.

CDC recommends providers vaccinate as soon as vaccine is available

But as I was saying there were some of those news reports that came out in the fall of last year and some physicians and other specialists in immunology were saying you know it might be better if we waited until late October or early November to get our flu vaccine because that way we have that optimal immunity level all the way through flu season so our immune system is able to fight off that flu virus all the way through 'til, 'til the late spring time when flu season is over and so there's a little bit of controversy, I would say, surrounding that based on the official recommendations and what might be optimal so the most important thing to remember is you need to get a flu shot every year.

The most important thing is to get vaccinated every year

If you're not sure that you can actually squeeze into that window in the late October to early November time frame it is perfectly fine to get your flu shot in September, you will still be protected for that season and that way you're sure you got your flu shot and you didn't miss your opportunity. Something else to keep in mind is - it's still okay if for whatever reason you didn't get your flu shot to continue to get it even into February and March.

Can be vaccinated even in the spring

That early part of the spring season is still flu season, you can still catch the flu so it's important to remember, just get it every year as soon as you possibly can if you want to try to optimize it and you know you can hit that window that's great too and go ahead and get vaccinated all the way through the spring time.

Question 5 — What is this high-dose injection?

Is there such a thing as a high dose injection of the flu shot? Who can get this? Is it more expensive?

Answer

So, yes, yes, there is. It is specifically for adults 65 or older

There is such a thing as a high dose version of the flu vaccine and the reason we have that is because people who are age 65 and older have a less strong response to the standard flu vaccine. So this particular flu vaccine has been shown in a couple of studies to improve the immune response in people who are 65 or older.

Older adults do not develop as strong of a response to the vaccine as younger adults, so we know the response is not as strong, we simply give essentially a higher dose of the vaccine and that improves the response and therefore that person is more likely to be protected against the flu. Now, it's important to remember that CDC which is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not have any specific recommendation on which flu vaccine to receive so if you are age 65 or older

CDC does not state a preference

You can receive any flu vaccine that is manufactured for a person your age. If a high dose is available and you would like to get that, that is perfectly fine but the standard dose will work as well. As far as how much it costs:

Medicare will cover, double check all insurance

Medicare, Part B, which is the doctor portion...the office visits that most people have for Medicare, will generally cover for every Medicare beneficiary one flu shot per season. But, if you've got any questions about that, you may want to speak with your provider before you receive the vaccine. I am not aware of any differences in price for the high dose versus the standard dose so you should be able to choose and price shouldn't be a factor for you and then most commercial insurance as well, that younger people may have before they have Medicare generally cover one yearly flu vaccine as well, but you always want to make sure if you're not certain about the coverage to double check with your insurance company before you get the vaccine.

Question 6 — Can pharmacists give the flu shot?

If I go to a pharmacy, like CVS or Walgreens, is the pharmacist licensed to give flu shots?

Answer

So there's great news about pharmacies and pharmacists — pharmacists have the authority to administer immunizations in all 50 states

All pharmacists in all 50 states in the United States are licensed and authorized to administer flu vaccines. So, this is good because pharmacists tend to be more accessible healthcare providers than

Pharmacists are accessible, no appointment needed

Sometimes their physician's offices, they tend to be open on weekends, they have longer hours, you don't need an appointment to see a pharmacist...so if that's a convenient option for you, I encourage you to check with the pharmacy you typically go to...some of them have signs...they'll say "come get your flu shot today" kind of thing. So, just look for that...if they don't have it, ask, they may still have the flu vaccine available for you and one other point about getting the flu vaccine at a pharmacy is....

Tell your doctor you got the shot

It's a good idea to somehow communicate with your regular doctor that you have received that vaccine at a pharmacy. So there's a couple of ways to go about doing that:

- One is sometimes the pharmacists actually have an online registry that they'll send that information to that your doctor can view.
- Sometimes the pharmacist will send a fax over to your physician to say hey I gave this patient a flu vaccine today or
- You can simply take a print-out that the pharmacist will give you to your next doctor's appointment or take it to your doctor's office...that way all of your providers can coordinate your care and everyone is aware of the vaccines that you've received.

Question 7 — Is the flu shot safe?

Is the flu shot safe?

Answer

I'm so glad people are interested in the safety of vaccines and they're asking these questions. We've talked about some of the benefits of receiving your flu vaccine. It can prevent very serious illness, but it's important to know that the vaccines that we're receiving are safe as well... The good news

Most people experience no or mild side effects

Is that most people who receive a flu vaccine either have no side effects at all or the side effects that they do have are very mild. So as you're probably aware, most people will receive a flu vaccine in the upper part of their arm (right here) so most of the side effects that you're going to see are completely related to that vaccination in that site....

Soreness, redness, tiredness

So you might have a little swelling or redness or tenderness around that site for a couple of days. A few other people might experience some more systemic side effects so other parts of the body might be affected. They might have a headache for a little while, they might feel a little tired....it's important to note that these are not signs that you're getting the flu, but rather signs that the vaccine is actually working and that your immune system is building up that response to the flu. So important, couple of important reminders that when you go see your provider to get your flu vaccine you want to make sure to talk about your medical history. There's a couple of things that are really important and your provider should be asking you about them but if they don't....

Tell your provider if you have allergies or if you are sick

You want to make sure to tell them any allergies that you have...there are certain, very small percentage of the population that can't receive the flu vaccine because of specific allergies or if they have a specific allergy they need to be monitored carefully after receiving the vaccine. The other thing you want to make sure to tell your provider about is if you're sick the day that you plan to receive your flu vaccine. If you have a mild illness generally you can go ahead and get vaccinated, but if it's something that's a little more severe you may need to wait until you're recovered before you receive that vaccine.

One good place that's available for everybody to get more information on the safety of flu vaccines is in what's called a vaccine information statement. So that's a piece of paper, it's generally front and back with information about that vaccine and it's given to you by the provider that's giving the vaccine, but you can also look them up online if you have access to the internet. So all you would need to do is go online and search flu vaccine information statement and you can see some very specific information about the safety of flu vaccine, but by and large when we're talking about looking at risks versus benefits of the flu vaccine, the benefits do far outweigh the risks and most everybody age 6 months or older in the United States should receive their flu vaccine every year for optimal protection.