

Preventing Flu

In a healthy person, influenza—also called the flu—causes fever, muscle aches, congestion, and other cold-like symptoms. A healthy person with the flu will sleep a lot and feel sick, but he or she will get better in one or two weeks. However, the flu makes some people very ill and can lead to complications. Every year about 200,000 Americans are hospitalized and 36,000 die from the flu, so it is very important for some people to be vaccinated against the flu (get a flu shot).

Q: Who Should Get the Flu Vaccine?

Infants and toddlers between the ages of six months and two years should get a flu shot. Older children also need to get a flu shot if they have:

- heart or lung disorders, including asthma
- chronic diseases such as diabetes, kidney disease, certain kinds of anemia, or immune system problems, including HIV/AIDS

Children should also get a flu shot if they live with people who could become extremely ill if they got the flu, such as pregnant women and children and adults who have certain health problems. Infants, especially those who were born prematurely, and people who are over sixty-five years old should also get a flu shot.

In addition, families living in shelters—or staying with relatives in cramped apartments and houses—are at greater risk for getting the flu because they're sharing such tight spaces, so flu shots can help those families stay well.

Some people should *never* get the flu shot or any other kind of flu vaccine. Because the flu vaccine is grown inside eggs, children and adults who are allergic to eggs (or have had allergic reactions to previous flu vaccines) should not get one.

Q: When Should People Get a Flu Shot?

It's best to get a flu shot in the fall, before "flu season." Flu season starts in November and usually ends in April. December, January, and February are typically the worst months for flu, when the most people have it and others are most likely to get it.

Q: What's in a Flu Shot?

Influenza is caused by a virus. The flu shot contains a small amount of dead, or killed, flu viruses. The flu shot does not make people ill with the flu. The dead viruses stimulate the body's immune system, so it will be able to fight off the real flu when it arrives in winter.

The flu mist vaccine (a nasal spray) is another form of flu vaccination. The nasal spray does contain live flu virus, so some people who get this vaccine may develop some mild flu-like

symptoms. But it's still worth getting because, just like the flu shot, the flu mist vaccine can keep you from getting a really bad case of the flu.

The flu virus changes every year, so people need to get a new flu shot every year.

Q: How Do People Feel after the Shot?

The flu shot generally is very safe, and most people have no problems with it. Occasionally, the spot where the vaccine is injected might feel sore. After the flu shot, some people feel achy or have a mild fever. In



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comparison, the actual flu can make people sick for one or two weeks.

Q: Are There Other Ways to Prevent the Flu?

As simple as it sounds, washing your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds is one of the most effective ways to keep from getting colds or the flu and giving them to others. During flu season, you should wash your hands often and teach your children to do the same. When water isn't available, use alcohol-based products made for cleansing hands.

Simple Steps Help Prevent the Spread of Colds and Flu

Here are several ways to help keep yourself—and your children—from getting a cold or flu or passing it on to others.

1. Practice good health habits.

Staying healthy helps fight off disease.

- Eat a balanced diet.
 - Consume a variety of foods, including vegetables, fruits, and whole grain products.
 - Include low-fat dairy products, lean meats, poultry, fish, and beans.
 - Drink lots of water and go easy on salt, sugar, alcohol, and saturated fat.
- Exercise on a regular basis to stay—or become—fit and strong.



- Get plenty of rest.
- Ensure that your immunizations are up-to-date. If you have a chronic health problem, get vaccinated for pneumonia to prevent further complications from influenza.

2. Limit the spread of flu virus.

Practice proper hand washing as well as cough and sneeze etiquette—and teach these habits to your family.

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
 - If soap and water are unavailable, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with tissue.
 - Put used tissues in a waste basket.
 - Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve—not into your hands—if you don't have a tissue.
- Wash your hands after coughing or sneezing.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth to prevent germs from entering your body.



3. Stay home if you are sick.

If you or family members are sick:

- Stay home from work or school.
 - Put off errands until you are well.
- Avoid contact with others.
 - Stay at least six feet away from others when you are in public.