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Influenza What Should I do?

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Your Life Your Health

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This year's flu epidemic may be the worse since the 2009 pandemic. The cold and flu season has hit Texas particularly hard. Beaumont and Port Arthur top the national list for the severity of flu cases while the valley is No.2.

The flu scares people. In one respect, this can be a good thing - fear can be a great motivator to action. But it can also cause people to freeze and take fewer precautions. In the case of this year's severe flu season, we may be looking at more than 50,000 deaths in the U.S. with over 50 million cases of the flu and 500,000 hospitalizations.

Herd Immunity - My Community Responsibility

The first protection remains the flu shot. According to Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the current flu shot is expected to be 30 percent effective at preventing the flu with an additional benefit in terms of limiting spread and decreasing severity. That makes it well worth getting, even though, as Fauci says, the process of inoculating this strain in eggs led to an antigenic drift (slight mutation) away from the vaccine target.

Even in January and February, the current vaccine is still well worth taking. People need to understand the concept of herd immunity. If you take the flu vaccine, you are not only protecting yourself, you are also decreasing the risk of spreading flu to a young child or elderly parent or pregnant woman you may come in contact with. Those with chronic illnesses are at much higher risk of flu complications from secondary infections (i.e. pneumonia, ear infection, meningitis, etc.) or a heart attack, which is several times more likely if your body is stressed from fighting the flu.

Steps to Prevent the Flu

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the following steps to try and prevent the flu:

1. Avoid close contact -- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.
2. Stay home when you are sick -- If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. This will help prevent spreading your illness to others.

3. Cover your mouth and nose -- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
4. Clean your hands -- Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
5. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth -- Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.
6. Practice other good health habits -- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at home, work or school, especially when someone is ill. Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food.

Additionally, the CDC offers three tips specifically to fight the flu:

[Take time to get a flu vaccine.](#)

- CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine as the first and most important step in protecting against flu viruses.
- While there are many different flu viruses, a flu vaccine protects against the viruses that research suggests will be most common.
- Flu vaccination can reduce flu illnesses, doctors' visits, and missed work and school due to flu, as well as prevent flu-related hospitalizations.
- Everyone 6 months of age and older should get a flu vaccine every year before flu activity begins in their community. CDC recommends getting vaccinated by the end of October, if possible. .
- Vaccination of high risk persons is especially important to decrease their risk of severe flu illness.
- [People at high risk of serious flu complications](#) include young children, [pregnant women](#), people with certain chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes or heart and lung disease and [people 65 years and older](#).
- Vaccination also is important for [health care workers](#), and other people who live with or care for high risk people to keep from spreading flu to them.
- [Children younger than 6 months](#) are at high risk of serious flu illness, but are too young to be vaccinated. People who care for infants should be vaccinated instead.

[Take everyday preventive actions to stop the spread of germs.](#)

- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.

- While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.
- If you are sick with flu symptoms, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone for 24 hours without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.)
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- [Wash your hands](#) often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an [alcohol-based hand rub](#).
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs like the flu.
- See [Everyday Preventive Actions\[257 KB, 2 Pages\]](#) and [Nonpharmaceutical Interventions \(NPIs\)](#) for more information about actions – apart from getting vaccinated and taking medicine – that people and communities can take to help slow the spread of illnesses like influenza (flu).

Take flu antiviral drugs if your doctor prescribes them.

- If you get the flu, antiviral drugs can be used to treat your illness.
- Antiviral drugs are different from antibiotics. They are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) and are not available over-the-counter.
- Antiviral drugs can make illness milder and shorten the time you are sick. They may also prevent serious [flu complications](#). [For people with high risk factors\[702 KB, 2 Pages\]](#), treatment with an antiviral drug can mean the difference between having a milder illness versus a very serious illness that could result in a hospital stay.
- Studies show that flu antiviral drugs work best for treatment when they are started within 2 days of getting sick, but starting them later can still be helpful, especially if the sick person has a [high risk factor](#) or is very sick from the flu. Follow your doctor's instructions for taking this drug.
- Flu symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people also may have vomiting and diarrhea. People may be infected with the flu, and have respiratory symptoms without a fever.

Are flu vaccines safe?

Flu vaccines have good safety record. Hundreds of millions of Americans have safely received flu vaccines over the past 50 years, and there has been extensive research

supporting the safety of flu vaccines.

A flu vaccine is the first and best way to reduce your chances of getting the flu and spreading it to others. CDC recommends that everyone 6 months of age and older receive a flu vaccine every year.

Can I get the flu from the flu vaccine?

No, the flu vaccine cannot cause flu. The vaccines either contain inactivated virus, meaning the viruses are no longer infectious, or a particle designed to look like a flu virus to your immune system. While the nasal spray flu vaccine does contain a live virus, the viruses are changed so that they cannot give you the flu.

Do flu vaccines cause any side effects?

Like any medical product, vaccines can cause side effects. Side effects of the flu vaccine are generally mild and go away on their own within a few days.

Common side effects from the flu shot include:

- Soreness, redness, and/or swelling from the shot
- Headache
- Fever
- Nausea
- Muscle aches

Conclusion

It is not too late to take a flu shot. It is time to follow the other measures as discussed above to avoid the flu and/or to mitigate its impact if you get it.