

Flu Season Alert: What You Need to Know to Stay Safe and Healthy

Imagine missing out on weeks of work, school, and family activities due to an illness that could have been prevented. Influenza or flu is a highly contagious respiratory illness that can cause a wide range of symptoms, from mild to severe, and may even lead to death, especially in high-risk populations such as the elderly, young children, pregnant women, and individuals with certain underlying health conditions.

The CDC approximates 9 to 45 million cases of symptomatic illnesses, 4 to 21 million outpatient visits, between 140,000 and 810,000 hospitalizations, and 12,000 to 61,000 deaths related to influenza occur annually in the United States.

What causes Flu?

Several different types and strains of influenza viruses can cause flu.

Influenza A viruses [subtypes, A(H1N1) and A(H3N2)] can target a broad spectrum of host species, including birds, pigs, dogs, and humans.

Influenza B (9B-Yamagata and B-Victoria) primarily affects humans.

Influenza C virus is not thought to cause human influenza epidemics.

influenza D virus has been noted to cause infections in cattle, goats, and pigs.

How does the Flu spread?

Influenza or flu spreads mainly when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks, releasing *droplets* that can be inhaled by others nearby. The virus can also be spread by touching surfaces contaminated with it and then touching the face.

What are the symptoms of flu?

Flu can mimic many other respiratory illnesses. However often symptoms develop abruptly and include:

- Fever with or without chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Loss of appetite
- General malaise
- Fatigue
- Myalgia
- Headache
- Joint pain

How can I decrease my likelihood of getting the flu?

- **Get vaccinated:** Vaccination is currently the primary method for decreasing the risk of infection. It also reduces the impact flu has on the community, including limiting viral spread, illness severity, and duration, particularly for those at high risk.
- **Practice good hygiene:** Wash hands frequently with soap and water.
- **Stay away from sick people:** Avoid close contact with those who are ill.
- **Disinfect surfaces:** Regularly clean commonly touched surfaces like doorknobs and mobile phones.

Understanding Flu Vaccines: Why do I need the vaccine every year?

Influenza viruses possess two antigens, hemagglutinin, and neuraminidase. These antigens can combine in various ways, causing the development of new virus strains through antigenic shifts and drifts. These variations are responsible for the need for annual updates to influenza vaccines to ensure their effectiveness against circulating strains.

Who should get the vaccine?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommend routine annual influenza vaccination for all individuals aged 6 months and older who do not have contraindications. In the US, three types of influenza vaccines are available: Inactivated Influenza Vaccine (IIV), Recombinant Influenza Vaccine (RIV), and Live-Attenuated Influenza Vaccine (LAIV).

What is new in this year's Flu Vaccine?

Each year, health experts from organizations like the World Health Organization and the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention analyze the data to predict which flu strains will most likely circulate. Based on this, selected strains are included in the vaccines for the next flu season to enhance their effectiveness.

For the 2023-24 influenza season, the FDA and WHO recommend the **quadrivalent vaccine**, meaning they are designed to protect against **four different flu viruses: two influenza A viruses** (Victoria/H1N1 and Darwin/H3N2) and **two influenza B viruses** (from Victoria and Yamagata lineages). Additionally, previously, it was advised that people who had experienced allergic reactions to eggs beyond urticaria receive their vaccinations under medical supervision. However, this guideline has been revised. No additional safety precautions are needed for those with egg allergies beyond the standard vaccine precautions when receiving the influenza vaccine.

Get vaccinated today to protect yourself and your community this flu season. For additional information, visit your healthcare provider or local pharmacy.

For more information of the flu vaccine visit <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/flushot.htm>

