

# W o m e n ' s HEALTH UPDATES



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## The Flu: What Women Need to Know

These days the mere word “flu” can be frightening. The media is filled with stories about the flu, from the importance of getting a flu vaccine and outbreaks of avian flu abroad, to discussions about a flu pandemic.

Relax—and get the facts. It’s important to remember that the avian flu virus occurs mainly in birds, and does not usually infect people. Most cases of avian influenza infection in humans have resulted from contact with infected poultry (e.g., domesticated chicken, ducks and turkeys) or surfaces contaminated with secretion/excretions from infected birds. The spread of avian influenza viruses from one ill person to another has been reported very rarely, and transmission has not been observed to continue beyond one person.<sup>17</sup>

Your main concern now should be the garden-variety type of flu viruses, which infect up to one in five people a year, sending more than 200,000 people in the U.S. to the hospital with flu-related complications.<sup>1,2</sup>

This Women’s Health Update will explain the facts about the flu. It will

also provide strategies you and your family can take to try and get through this flu season without a bout of the high fever, muscle aches and fatigue that are the hallmarks of the flu. If you do happen to catch the flu, the information here also will help you recover as quickly as possible, with as few complications as possible.

### Fact 1. The flu is not just a bad cold.

Both the flu and colds can be caused by viruses. But, once you know the differences between these illnesses, you won’t confuse the two. While certain symptoms are similar—including runny or stuffy nose, sore throat and cough—the flu usually also brings one or more of these symptoms with it as well: a high fever (102-104°F), an intense headache, strong aches and pains, overall weakness and a serious dry cough.<sup>1</sup>

A cold creeps up on you little by little. And, while you might not feel great, you can still pursue most daily activities. Plus, when it’s over, it’s over.

The flu, however, strikes quickly, often with debilitating exhaustion. If you have the flu, you’re usually

too sick and weak to go to work, school or even to leave your bed.<sup>3</sup> Even after the severe but short phase passes, you may still feel tired for weeks.

Finally, while the only way to avoid a cold is to stay away from people with colds and to wash your hands frequently with soap and hot water, there are medical options for preventing the flu—vaccines and antiviral drugs, both described in more detail below.

### Fact 2. The flu, “influenza,” requires attention—it is a serious illness.

In addition to landing you in bed for several days feeling plain awful, the flu can be deadly. Every year about 36,000 people in the U.S. die from influenza. Most are over 65, but about 92 deaths a year occur in children under five.<sup>4</sup>

The flu also can lead to serious complications, such as bacterial or viral pneumonia, dehydration, infections of the brain and spinal cord, Reye’s syndrome and heart conditions, as well as seizures in children. It can also aggravate existing health conditions like diabetes, congestive heart failure, asthma or other lung diseases.<sup>1</sup>

Like most viral diseases, the flu is highly contagious. You can infect others with the flu starting one day before you show any symptoms and for five days after getting sick.<sup>1</sup> An

*Even if you're young and healthy, you should try to get a flu vaccine. One study found that healthy working adults receiving the vaccine had 43 percent fewer sick days from work.*

annual flu vaccination can help stop the spread of the virus in local communities and across the country.

Flu viruses can also cause pandemics, in which millions of people around the world fall seriously ill with the disease. This typically occurs when a new strain of the influenza virus develops, one against which few people have any resistance. In the future, if the avian flu virus does change enough to commonly infect humans, researchers worry it could result in a pandemic.

### **Fact 3.** The flu season lasts much longer than you think.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and its Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), flu activity can begin to increase as early as October or November, but in the majority of recent influenza seasons, has not reached peak levels until late December through early March. While the timing of flu activity can vary by region, flu vaccine administered after November is still likely to be beneficial.<sup>18</sup>

**Fact 4.** The flu vaccine is a safe and effective prevention strategy for most people. The flu vaccine is the primary option in the U.S. for preventing the flu.

When the vaccine and the circulating viruses are similar, the vaccine can prevent the flu in 70 to 90 percent of healthy adults under 65. Even when the vaccine and viruses aren't as well matched, as was the case during the 2003-2004 season, the vaccine still protected 52 percent of healthy adults and 38 percent of those with one or more high-risk conditions.<sup>7</sup>

In adults 65 and older, as well as those with certain chronic diseases, a weaker immune system can prevent the flu vaccine from providing as much protection as it does in younger, healthy adults. However, the vaccine still provides a significant benefit with little risk to older adults.

Even if you do get the flu, the vaccine can protect you against flu-related complications by minimizing the severity of the illness—a key concern for those at high risk.<sup>5</sup>

And, contrary to flu myths out there, you cannot get the flu from a flu shot or the newer nasal vaccine. It can take two weeks before the vaccine's protection kicks in—giving the virus a window of opportunity to make you sick. If you do get sick after a vaccination, it's just coincidence. In fact, the most common side effect of the shot is a little soreness at the injection site, and the most common side effect of the spray is a runny nose or nasal congestion.<sup>5</sup>

### **Fact 5.** Antiviral medications and flu vaccinations are different.

The flu vaccine doesn't treat the flu; it just prevents it. And while four drugs—amantadine (Symadine, Symmetrel), rimantadine (Flumadine), zanamivir (Relenza) and oseltamivir (Tamiflu)—are approved to treat the flu, they don't make it go away overnight. They only help you feel better a day

or two sooner than if you didn't take the medicine, and they can make you less contagious. However, they must be taken within two days of the first symptom to have any effect.<sup>8</sup>

### **Fact 6.** People of all ages should be vaccinated for the flu.

The only people who should not be vaccinated without first consulting a health care professional are those who have had a severe reaction to a flu vaccine in the past, including developing Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS) within six weeks of getting a flu vaccine previously, children under six months, those with a severe allergy to chicken eggs and those who are already ill with a fever.

Some people are at higher risk of complications from the flu than others. For them, a flu shot is not an option—it's a must. This includes anyone aged 65 or older; anyone living in a nursing home or other medical care facility; anyone with respiratory diseases, anemia or other chronic lung, heart, kidney or blood disorder, including diabetes; those with a weakened immune system, either from medication, cancer treatment or disease such as HIV/AIDS; and those with dementia, spinal cord injury, seizure disorder or other neuromuscular problems that could affect breathing.

Additionally, babies six months to 59 months and any child taking aspirin as a long-term therapy should be vaccinated, as should women who are pregnant during flu season.

Even if you're young and healthy, you should try to get a flu vaccine. One study found that healthy working adults receiving the vaccine had 43 percent fewer sick days from work.<sup>9</sup>

## Diagnosing and Treating Flu

A laboratory test can definitively diagnose the flu, but most health care professionals diagnose it based on your symptoms, described earlier.

Most cases of the flu improve on their own within four to seven days and don't require a health professional's care. But if you are in a high-risk category for complications—including the very young or elderly, anyone who is immune compromised or who has a serious chronic health condition like heart disease or diabetes—you should see your health care professional as soon as the first symptom develops.

Not only will your health care professional be able to keep a close eye on you throughout the illness, but he or she may want to start you on an antiviral medication to help your body fight off the virus.

If you do get the flu and find your symptoms getting worse instead of better, particularly if you have a cough that begins to produce phlegm and turns wet, call your health care professional for medical advice. Your symptoms may have progressed to pneumonia and will need medical care.

## Other Treatments for Flu

Beyond antivirals, your best bet for treating the flu is following what your mother told you—get plenty of rest and fluids. You can also use over-the-counter medications such as aspirin and acetaminophen to help with fever (never give aspirin to a child with fever, however), and decongestants to help with the cough and runny nose. Cool compresses and warm baths also can help with the fever and achiness.

## Preventing the Flu

As noted previously, a flu vaccination is the primary method of preventing the flu.

Today, there are two types of vaccines—a shot that contains killed flu virus, and a nasal spray that contains weakened live viruses. While the shot is approved for use in anyone over six months, the spray is only approved for use by healthy people ages five to 49.

The vaccines themselves are grown in eggs, which is why people with severe allergies to eggs should consult with their health care professional before receiving a flu vaccination.

Both flu vaccines work by stimulating an immune response in your body to the flu virus. In a way, it's like having your immune system study for a test—the test being the real flu virus. Then, when your immune system encounters the flu virus, it already has the answers (or immune response) to quickly overcome it rather than starting with a blank slate.

It generally takes your body about two weeks to make antibodies (immune system proteins that help your system recognize the flu virus) to the virus. So even though you should ideally get vaccinated in the fall, before flu season peaks, you can still reap the benefits of the vaccine if you happened to get vaccinated later in the flu season. In other words: Better late than never.

While a single flu vaccine lasts the entire season, it won't protect you next year because your immunity fades. Plus, as noted before, flu viruses change from year to year. That's why it's important to get vaccinated each year.

## Beyond the Vaccine

Even if you got a flu vaccination—and especially if you didn't—you should protect yourself as much as possible from exposure to the flu virus. That means:

- Keep away from people who have the flu. Wash your hands frequently with soap and hot water or alcohol-based cleansers, particularly after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose.
- Use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, or cover your mouth and nose with your upper sleeve, not your hand.
- Throw used tissues into the trash.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Stay home when you're sick. Not only does it reduce the risk of you spreading viruses, but when you're sick, your immune system is already working overtime; it may not provide the kind of protection you need against the virus.

## Strengthening Your Immune System

The best defense against the flu is a good offense. A flu vaccine is step one. But there are other ways to strengthen your immune system against viruses.

- Follow a healthy diet. That means load up on fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean protein like fish, soy and beans and reduce alcohol intake. For an added immune system boost, use liberal amounts of garlic, stay away from sugar, switch from coffee to tea and follow a low-fat diet.<sup>10,11,12,13</sup>

*Your best bet for treating the flu is following what your mother told you—get plenty of rest and fluids.*

## Questions to Ask Your Health Care Professional

1. Am I at risk for catching the flu and/or developing complications from the flu?
2. Should I get a flu vaccination?
3. Can I pass the flu on to others if I'm not vaccinated?
4. Should my children get vaccinated against the flu?
5. With my medical history, is the flu vaccination safe for me?
6. What's the difference between the stomach flu and "the flu"?
7. What are the possible side effects of the flu vaccination?
8. What other ways can I protect myself from getting the flu?
9. What are antiviral medications?
10. If I get the flu, what should I do?

- Stop smoking. Not only does it stress your immune system, but some studies suggest that smokers are more likely to get the flu than nonsmokers.<sup>14</sup>
- Learn to manage stress through relaxation techniques like meditation, mental imagery and deep breathing. Stress is a known immune system suppressor.<sup>15</sup>
- Follow government guidelines and aim for 30 to 60 minutes a day of moderate exercise. When researchers studied the blood of 56 people aged 62 and older who received flu shots, they found those exercising at least 20 minutes three or more times a week had more antibodies to the flu viruses two weeks after the vaccine than those who exercised less.<sup>16</sup>

## Resources

**American Academy of Asthma, Allergy and Immunology (AAAAI)**  
414-272-6071

[www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org)

Offers asthma and allergy information, as well as flu tips.

**National Family Caregivers Association**

1-800-896-3650

[www.thefamilycaregiver.org](http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org)

Offers information and support for family caregivers, including flu tips.

**National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**

301-496-5717

[www.niaid.nih.gov](http://www.niaid.nih.gov)

"Focus on the Flu"

Presents resources on flu prevention, treatment and general information.

**National Women's Health Resource Center**

1-877-986-9472

[www.healthywomen.org](http://www.healthywomen.org)

"Your 2006-2007 Flu Prevention Guide" Specially designed by the NWHRC, this online guide provides flu prevention and treatment tips.

**U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

1-800-232-4636

CDC Health Topics: Influenza

[www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)

Offers flu information, immunization updates and a "flu map," showing state-by-state progress of the virus.



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