

# 6 reasons patients avoid flu vaccination

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With flu season approaching, it is imperative that everyone 6 months or older, with rare exceptions, get an influenza vaccine. However, it is likely that most of your patients who have not yet received an influenza vaccination for the current flu season simply have not made the time to do so.

But there is another group of patients who seem to have a ready set of explanations for why they skip vaccination each flu season. Here are the rationales these patients might offer and how you can respond.

## I'm healthy, so I don't need a flu vaccine

It is true that certain groups of patients—those who are pregnant, young children, older adults and patients with chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes or asthma—are at higher risk of severe complications from flu infection. But flu is a contagious disease that can lead to other serious illnesses, such as pneumonia.

“Any flu infection can carry a risk of serious complications, hospitalization or death, even among otherwise healthy children and adults,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes.

Therefore, getting vaccinated is a safer choice than risking illness to obtain immune protection.

## The flu vaccine isn't safe and can give me the flu

Flu vaccines are safe, as shown by more than 50 years of research and experience among hundreds of millions of Americans who have been immunized against influenza. There are some common side effects, such as swelling or redness from the shot, muscle aches, fever and nausea. But those should not be mistaken for influenza, which sends between 140,000 and 710,000 people in the U.S. to the hospital annually, according to the CDC. The figure varies widely from season to season, [with nearly 400,000 being hospitalized](#) during the 2023–2024 flu season.

Additionally, influenza vaccines cannot cause flu illness. Flu vaccines given with a needle (i.e., [flu shots](#)) are made with either inactivated (killed) viruses, or with only a single protein from the flu virus. The nasal spray vaccine contains live viruses that are attenuated, or weakened, so that they will not cause illness. However, you may still catch a non-flu virus. Non-flu cold viruses cannot be prevented by an influenza vaccine. And since it takes about two weeks for the protective effects of flu vaccination to kick in, you can still catch the flu during that time period.

## It is better to get sick with the flu

“No,” the CDC warns. Anyone can get sick with flu and experience serious complications. Though the U.S. death toll from influenza varies from year to year, the CDC estimates between 12,000 and 51,000 deaths annually since 2010.

Even if your illness is relatively mild and brief, others may not be so lucky, and you can spread flu to them. That is especially concerning because some patients catch the influenza virus but show no symptoms. Not knowing they have flu, they are not as careful as they would otherwise be in protecting family, friends, neighbors and co-workers from potential exposure.

## I’ll wait until flu hits my area

As mentioned above, it takes about two weeks after flu vaccination for your body to develop the antibodies that protect you against influenza. Health experts strongly encourage people in the U.S. to get vaccinated before there is flu activity in their local area,

by October ideally.

It is important to note, though, that if you have not been vaccinated by the end of October, it can still be protective to get a flu vaccine. The CDC continues to recommend vaccination of those not yet vaccinated beyond October, as long as the threat of flu remains. The flu is unpredictable and has varying seasons, typically peaking between December and March, but occurring as late as May, says the CDC.

## **I hate getting injections**

While needles are no fun, a trip to the hospital or a couple of weeks in bed are no picnic either. And as already stated, it could be even worse than that. Any little discomfort that you may feel from the flu shot is nothing compared to the suffering caused by influenza, the CDC says.

Flu can make you sick for several days, send you to the hospital or worse. For those who do not like needles, the nasal spray flu vaccine may be a good alternative, if you are eligible to receive it.

## **I was vaccinated last year**

Influenza viruses are changing all the time and flu vaccines are updated seasonally to afford the best possible protection against the virus strains that experts predict will circulate widely during flu season.

In addition, the protection from last year's vaccine fades with time. The CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine for everyone 6 months of age and older because a person's immune protection from vaccination declines over time. An annual vaccination allows for the best protection against the flu, says the CDC.

Vaccines are key to keeping everyone healthy and preventing infection. Call your primary care physician to schedule a vaccine visit. More information on where to get a flu shot is available at [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov).

