

What doctors want patients to know about flu vaccines

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AT A GLANCE: Influenza can cause serious illness, but vaccination can help protect you and those around you. Here are key things you will learn about flu vaccination from family physicians Carlos Galindo, MD, and Christopher Zipp, DO, in this article:

- Everyone 6 months or older should get a flu vaccine each year.
- September and October are ideal times to get vaccinated, but it is still worthwhile to get a flu shot later in the season if the virus is still circulating.
- Flu vaccination can lower your risk of illness and help make symptoms less severe if you do get influenza.
- You cannot get flu from an injected influenza vaccine.
- Flu, COVID-19 and RSV vaccines can also be given at the same visit.
- If you develop flu symptoms, contact your doctor the same day, especially if you are at higher risk for complications, because treatment may help shorten the illness.

Influenza can be easy to underestimate until flu season arrives—which typically runs from October through May—and illnesses, missed work and school, and hospitalizations begin to climb. While some people recover within several days, flu can lead to serious complications, particularly for people who are at higher risk of severe illness. That is why it is important for everyone to use the tools we have available to mitigate infection and illness, including getting the flu vaccination. Everyone six months or older is recommended to get an influenza vaccine to reduce the risk of severe outcomes.

During the 2025-2026 flu season, influenza caused at least 32 million illnesses, 390,000 hospitalizations and 24,000 deaths in the U.S., according to preliminary data from the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). For the 2024–2025 flu season, the CDC estimated that flu vaccination prevented about 10 million flu-related illnesses in the U.S., 5 million medical visits, 185,000 hospitalizations and 12,000 deaths.

The AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series gives physicians a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today's health care headlines.

In this installment, two physicians took time to discuss what doctors wish patients knew about the influenza vaccine to help clear up any misinformation. They are:

- [Carlos Galindo, MD](#), a family physician at Texas Health Family Care, a Texas Health Physicians Group practice.
- [Christopher Zipp, DO](#), a family physician at Atlantic Health in Morristown, New Jersey.

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You can get flu any time of the year

“Flu is short for influenza and it’s a very contagious virus that infects the nose, throat and lungs, and can cause illness,” Dr. Galindo said, noting “it can range on the spectrum from mild illness to severe.”

“The typical flu season is October to May, but here in the U.S. we generally see most cases around January through March,” he noted.

However, “you can get the flu any time. You can get it all year round, but people think of it as the beginning of winter with a kickoff sometime between December and February, and then it lasts for a few months,” Dr. Zipp explained. “It is not uncommon for us to continue to vaccinate people all the way through March, even early April because people can still get flu.”

Flu vaccination can prevent severe symptoms

When it comes to symptoms of influenza, it often includes “fever, chills and body aches. That’s your classic clinical triad,” Dr. Galindo said. “But you can also have sore throat, runny nose and headache.”

“I always ask patients: Do you feel fatigued like you’ve been run over by a Mack Truck? It’s that type of lethargy and malaise,” he noted. For children, “they can have some gastrointestinal presentation. With kids, you can have vomiting and diarrhea, but generally in the adults it’s fever, chills and body aches.”

“Over a couple of hours, all of a sudden you get these systemic symptoms—you get a fever, chills and body aches—and it can lead to pneumonia and hospitalization,” said Dr. Zipp. “That’s what we really worry about quite a bit, especially people with underlying medical conditions. That’s one of the reasons why it is important that everybody gets a flu shot.”

You can’t get flu from the influenza vaccine

“The short answer is no you can’t get flu from the flu vaccine,” said Dr. Zipp, noting that flu vaccines that are injected do not contain the live influenza virus so you can’t get flu from the vaccine.

“A lot of times people feel like they get flu-like symptoms after getting the vaccine and usually that’s because you’re getting an immune response,” he explained. “Your body thinks it’s being attacked and you start to get an immune response but that turns off right away as your body recognizes this isn’t real, I’m just building an immunity.”

“So, you can’t get flu from the flu vaccine just like you can’t get polio from the injected polio vaccine,” Dr. Zipp said.

It takes the flu vaccine a couple of weeks to generate a full immune response. That means you don’t have full protection until a couple of weeks after you get your flu shot.

OK for flu, COVID-19 shots at same time

It is safe to get the flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and COVID-19 vaccines at the same visit to your doctor or pharmacy. Coadministration of vaccines is common practice. You may experience slightly more localized soreness, mild fatigue, headache, or a low-grade fever when getting more than one vaccine at a time.

“There's no contraindication to getting those all at the same time,” said Dr. Galindo. “I tell patients, ‘If you choose to do that you may want to get them in different arms, but there's no problem getting them all at the same time.’”

Vaccination can reduce flu risk by up to 60%

We typically don't know the effectiveness of the influenza vaccine until we get into flu season, when we can see what types of viruses end up circulating in the population.

The efficacy of flu shots “vary from year to year. We're constantly chasing what flu we are going to be protecting against,” Dr. Zipp said. “Sometimes they're more effective than others, so it depends.”

“Generally, studies have shown you get about 40% to 60% reduction in flu-related doctors' visits in those years where you get a good match. So, that's pretty effective,” Dr. Galindo said. “Even those years when the flu vaccine doesn't hit the target in terms of the exact strain of influenza circulating that year, there is still protection afforded.”

For example, if “you get flu, it's generally not as severe as it would otherwise be had you not gotten the flu shot,” he explained.

Get the flu vaccine by the end of October

The general recommendation is to “get vaccinated around September or October,” said Dr. Galindo. “You can get the flu vaccine before then, but you want to time it such that you get it in September or October because from the time of administration of the vaccine to the

time you actually have clinical protection is about two weeks.

“There’s a little lag time there,” he added. “Then you want to have your defenses ready so that when January, February, March hit, you’re ready to go. If you go too early, those immune antibodies can wane over time, so timing is of the essence.”

If you miss that September, October window, it’s not too late, though, noted Dr. Galindo. “I always tell patients it’s better to be late than never, especially in older individuals who have comorbid conditions, autoimmune disease, high blood pressure or diabetes. It’s always best to have it even if you’re out of that window.”

“Now there are some people who need to get it a little earlier. If you’re immunocompromised or you have chronic health conditions that put you at a higher risk, then I would say be in the earlier cohort,” Dr. Zipp said. “But don’t get it too early because then your immunity wanes.”

Ultimately, though, “October is a great month to get your flu shot. Get it done by Halloween,” he recommended.

Everyone should get vaccinated

“As a general rule, everyone 6 months or older should get the flu vaccine,” Dr. Galindo said, noting it is especially important for “young children, adults over 50, people who are pregnant, individuals with comorbid conditions and people who are caregivers to get a flu shot.”

“There are people with some medical conditions that cannot mount an immune response—their immune system doesn’t work. They can’t have it,” Dr. Zipp said. “Otherwise, everyone should have it.”

There are flu vaccine nasal sprays too

While the flu vaccine is recommended for 6 months or older, the nasal spray is generally recommended for ages 2 through 49 “because those individuals are not very young and

they're not very old," Dr. Galindo said, noting "there are some caveats in terms of who can get the nasal spray."

"You certainly don't want to give it to pregnant women, children ages 2 to 4 who have asthma or underlying lung issues, if you're immunocompromised or taking aspirin, if you have cochlear implants or any type of spinal fluid conditions," he explained. "There is a theoretical risk that the nasal spray—which technically is a live weakened version of the virus—can be potentially harmful to those populations."

"If a patient absolutely refuses the shot because they have a terrible fear of needles, then there's a nasal spray flu vaccine," Dr. Zipp added.

Do it for yourself and others

Getting vaccinated against influenza "is the single best way to protect yourself and your family members," Dr. Galindo said. "Even if it doesn't prevent you from getting the illness, if you do get the illness, it's not nearly as severe as it would be without vaccination."

"Flu is more than just a bad cold. This is a virus that can take lives and every year there are thousands of people who do lose their lives to flu," he said. But "there's something simple that we can do, and it's within reach. It's at your local grocery store. It's at your doctor's office. Get vaccinated. That's key."

Get a flu vaccine so you remain healthy

Everyone who can get the flu vaccine should "because you don't want to go to the hospital. You don't want to get really sick," Dr. Zipp said, noting that "influenza kills thousands of people in the U.S. each year and it's not just the very old or very young. You're rolling the dice."

"There are so many reasons not to be sick. If you can avoid missing work, you can save your PTO for a vacation instead of being miserable at home with flu," he said. "And if you don't go to the hospital, you help reduce the cost of care too."

There are many places to get the flu shot

If you're looking to get vaccinated against flu, "there are several places you can go," Dr. Galindo said. "You can certainly start with your doctor's office and your pediatrician."

"A lot of pharmacies have flu vaccine available, along with local health departments and community health centers," he said.

Additionally, "a lot of employers will run flu clinics because they don't want to have those sick days and it keeps people healthy," Dr. Zipp shared.

"Meanwhile, "different senior centers, community organizations and schools may also offer the flu shot," Dr. Galindo noted, emphasizing that "it's quite readily available, and if you've got insurance, it's generally free."

"Get the flu shot at the most convenient place," Dr. Zipp emphasized. And if you get the vaccine somewhere other than your primary care physician's office, remember to let your doctor know you did receive the flu shot so they can make note of that in their records.

Vaccines are key to keeping everyone healthy and preventing infection. Visit spreadthefacts.org to learn more about respiratory virus season vaccine recommendations and to schedule your vaccine appointment, visit vaccinefinder.org.

Take additional steps to prevent flu

Beyond getting the influenza vaccine, there are other ways to prevent flu and "it's what our parents taught us: washing our hands," Dr. Galindo said. "All it takes to inoculate yourself is to touch a doorknob that has viral particle from somebody who may have coughed or sneezed on it before."

"You touch your eyes, your nose, and there you go, you're inoculated," he said. "So, always wash your hands, cover your coughs and sneezes, and be conservative if you feel sick and just stay home. Not only are you helping yourself, you're helping others."

Additionally, “if you come down with flu, clean the areas that you use that are general to other people in your household. Wipe down the kitchen counters after you use it and the bathroom,” Dr. Galindo said, noting that it is also important to “get plenty of sleep, try to eat a balanced diet and stay hydrated.”

Contact your doctor if you feel sick

While you can safely get a flu shot if you have a mild illness such as a low-grade cold, minor cough, runny nose or ear infection, it is important to contact your doctor right away, said Dr. Zipp, because “influenza is a clinical diagnosis.”

“There are medications for high-risk people that can help shorten the time you have influenza,” he said. “But you should make that call on the day you feel symptoms.”