

Don't let myths about the flu shot prevent you from staying healthy this winter

The weather is changing and flu season is here, so now is the time to protect yourself and your family by getting a flu shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all people ages six months of age and older receive an annual influenza vaccination—or flu shot—as the first and most important step in protecting themselves and their families against influenza.

“Influenza can make people feel miserable and disrupt every aspect of their daily lives – work, school, sports and holiday celebrations, just to name a few,” said Dr. John M. Douglas, Jr., executive director of the Tri-County Health Department, which serves Adams, Arapahoe, and Douglas Counties. “Unfortunately, there are areas of misunderstanding that keep some people from getting vaccinated, and by busting these myths, we want to convince everyone to get their recommended influenza vaccine.”

MYTH: You can get flu from the flu shot

You cannot catch the flu from receiving the shot. Your arm might hurt a bit after the shot, and you might have aches or a low fever, but this simply indicates that your immune response is working. These side effects are mild and only last a few hours, compared to how miserable you would feel for days or longer if you actually caught the flu. People who think they got flu from the vaccine really got sick from catching flu from another person and not the shot.

MYTH: Only babies and seniors need to get vaccinated

Getting a flu shot is especially important for seniors, pregnant women, and children under two, as well as for people with chronic health conditions and those with weakened immune systems. These people are at higher risk for complications from influenza, such as pneumonia or being hospitalized. But the flu shot is recommended for everyone over six months of age.

MYTH: I have the “stomach flu”

The “stomach flu” is not the same as respiratory flu. Respiratory flu, which is prevented by vaccination, is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs, and causes high fever, severe muscle aches, cough, and a sore throat. The ‘stomach flu’ is a term commonly used to describe a completely different illness produced by other viruses that causes upset stomach, diarrhea or vomiting.

MYTH: Get a flu shot by November or not at all

It is important to get a flu shot now and many doctor's offices and pharmacies have vaccine in stock. It takes about two weeks after being vaccinated for your body to develop a protective immune response against flu. However, it's never too late to get vaccinated as long as flu is in the community, even in January or later. Flu season can start as early as October and run as late as May each year. And because the flu virus often changes every year, it's important to get a new flu shot each year.

"There are other important steps you can take to help you stay well," said Dr. Douglas. "These include washing your hands frequently, avoiding contact with people who are sick, and cleaning hard surfaces and objects you touch with disinfectants."

"During the flu season, if you do develop flu-like symptoms, you should contact your health care provider to see if you should be treated with prescription medication, which may make the flu illness less severe. This is particularly important for people with medical conditions that can make a case of the flu worse—such as pregnancy, heart and lung disease, and conditions weakening the immune system—and for those people, treatment should start soon, within 48 hours of getting sick. But getting a flu shot is absolutely the most important prevention measure you can take," he added. "Remember, this and every year: don't let the flu mess with you, get the shot!"

For more information on influenza, visit www.tchd.org. To locate flu shot clinics near you, visit flushot.healthmap.org.

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