A LifeCare® Guide

Coping With the Flu

November marks the beginning of the flu season. This flu season, because of a shortfall in flu shot production, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are recommending that the existing flu vaccine supplies should be given to protect people who are at greatest risk from serious complications from influenza disease.

Every year in the United States, on average:

- ***5% to 20% of the population gets the flu***
- ***More than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications***
- ***Approximately 36,000 people die from flu***

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004.

Should You Get Vaccinated?

Who Should Get Vaccinated

According to the CDC, the following groups **should seek** vaccination:

- People 65 years of age and older
- Children ages six months to 23 months
- Adults and children two years of age and older with chronic lung or heart disorders including heart disease and asthma
- Pregnant women
- Adults and children two years of age and older with chronic metabolic diseases (including diabetes), kidney diseases, blood disorders (such as sickle cell anemia), or weakened immune systems, including persons with HIV/AIDS
- Children and teenagers, six months to 18 years of age, who take aspirin daily
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities
- Household members and out-of-home caregivers of infants under the age of six months (*Note*—children under the age of six months cannot be vaccinated.)
- Health care workers who provide direct, hands-on care to patients

If you or a loved one is in one of these groups, it means you are at increased risk for serious complications from the flu or in contact with people at high risk from complications from the flu. It is important that you protect yourself and your loved ones by getting vaccinated. The best time to get vaccinated is in October or November, but you can still get vaccinated in December or later.

The CDC is asking healthy people aged two to 64 years not to get vaccinated this year, or to wait until the priority groups in their area have had a chance to be vaccinated, so that available vaccine can go to protect those at greater risk for flu complications.

According to the CDC, when the vaccine closely "matches" the particular strain of flu that is circulating, it prevents influenza in approximately 70-90% of healthy persons under the age of 65. For older persons not living in care facilities and people with chronic medical conditions, the vaccination is 30-70% effective in preventing hospitalization for pneumonia and influenza.

Who Should Not Be Vaccinated

There are some people who should not get the flu vaccine. These include:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past
- People who have a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome
- Children under six months of age
- People who are sick with a fever. (These people can get vaccinated once their symptoms lessen.)

If you have questions about whether or not you should receive a vaccination, consult your health care provider.

Vaccine Risks and Side Effects

Generally, the risk of a flu shot causing serious harm or death is very small. However, as with any medication, serious side effects are possible. Serious risks associated with the flu shot include:

- Life-threatening allergic reactions. Symptoms typically occur within a few minutes to a few hours after the shot and include breathing problems, hoarseness, wheezing, hives, paleness, weakness, a fast heartbeat or dizziness.
- Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS). GBS is characterized by fever, nerve damage and muscle weakness. Although the association is not well established, one study has suggested that one in one million people vaccinated may be at risk of developing GBS due to receiving the flu vaccine.

If you have a serious reaction to the influenza vaccine, contact your health care provider immediately.

Side effects of the flu vaccine are usually minor. The most common side effect is soreness in the spot where you were vaccinated. Children who have not been previously exposed to the flu virus may experience additional side effects such as fever, tiredness and sore muscles. These symptoms usually start six to 12 hours after vaccination and may last for up to two days.

Flu Prevention

Although the flu shot is the best way to avoid getting the flu, if you can't get a flu shot there are still some things you can do to help prevent the spread of flu.

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- If you get the flu, stay home from work or school. This will help keep others from becoming infected.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve.
- Wash your hands often. Use soap and warm water, or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth; these are the most common ways of spreading germs.

If You Get the Flu

If you get the flu, the following tips may help:

- Rest
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco
- Take over-the-counter medications to relieve symptoms (*Note*—Aspirin should not be given to children under the age of eighteen as it may cause Reye's Syndrome, a rare but serious condition.).

Because the flu is caused by a virus, it cannot be treated with antibiotics. However, there are prescription antiviral medications that can lessen the duration of the flu. If you feel such medications may be appropriate in your situation, it is important to speak to your health care provider as soon as possible, as these medications are most effective if started within two days of the onset of symptoms.

People at high risk for complications from the flu, should always consult their health care provider immediately if they develop symptoms of the flu.

Is It a Cold or the Flu?

Because the flu can lead to serious complications, it is important to know the difference between a cold and the flu. In the early stages, it may be difficult to tell the difference. The following guidelines may help you determine whether you or a loved one has a cold or the flu:

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	Characteristic, high (102-104°F) lasts 3–4 days
Headache	Rare	Prominent
General aches, pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
Fatigue, weakness	Quite mild	Can last up to 2–3 weeks
Extreme exhaustion	Never	Early and prominent
Stuffy nose	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest discomfort, cough	Mild to moderate; hacking cough	Common; can become severe
Complications	Sinus congestion or earache	Bronchitis, pneumonia; can be life-threatening
Prevention	None	Annual vaccination; antiviral medicines—see your doctor
Treatment	Only temporary relief of symptoms	Antiviral medicines—see your doctor

Source: *The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease*

Seek medical attention immediately if you or a loved one has the flu and develops any of the following symptoms:

- High or protracted fever
- Difficulty breathing/shortness of breath
- Bluish skin color
- Chest pain or pressure
- Fainting or severe dizziness
- Mental confusion
- Severe or continuing vomiting
- Dehydration

In addition, if your symptoms get worse, last a long time, or if you start feeling better and then develop more serious symptoms, you should also contact your health care provider.

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