

8 Flu Shot Side Effects You Should Know About, According To Doctors

No, it will **not** give you the flu.

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Definitely don't mean to sound like your mom here, but...did you get your flu shot last year? Follow-up question: Are you planning to get yours *this* year?

Just asking because, you know, the flu can be deadly. During the 2019 to 2020 season, there were an estimated 39,000,000 to 56,000,000 reported flu illnesses (with 24,000 to 62,000 deaths) in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which lasted from October to April. Additionally, the CDC reported that the previous season included an estimated 35.5 million illnesses and 34,200 deaths. Just as a baseline, the flu can cause 12,000 deaths per year during a mild season, and anything over 56,000 deaths per year is considered a more severe bout, per the CDC.

But even though we're dealing with the impending flu season on top of the seemingly never-ending coronavirus pandemic, experts say there's a silver lining: mask-wearing and social distancing measures may help to minimize the spread of the flu this season, too. Even so, getting your flu shot will still be as important as ever.

Hesitant to get jabbed by a needle? We get it: The flu shot is still, well, a shot, and that's a turn off to some. It can be kind of a crapshoot, too. Meaning: The flu shot is not 100 percent effective...but that *doesn't* mean you should skip it.

This past year, though, things were **a bit better.**

The shot is estimated to have been 39 percent effective during the 2019 to 2020 season, according to the CDC. To put that into a broader context, the flu shot generally provides about a 65 percent protection rate against contracting the flu, according to Amesh Adalja, MD, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

So while even that 39 percent figure might sound low to you, it's actually a decent number, and it does not mean you should skip your yearly injection (**which you should get by the end of October, suggests the CDC**). Flu season typically starts in October, peaks in December, and can stick around until May, so you want to be covered for *all of it*.

"Just because the vaccine isn't 100 percent [effective] doesn't mean it's worthless," says Dr. Adalja. "And even if you *do* get the flu, [if you're vaccinated] you are much less likely to have a severe case requiring hospitalization, less likely to have major destruction to your life, and less likely to spread it."

Plus, there's hope that this year's shot will outdo its predecessors.

Since there are different flu viruses out there (and they're constantly changing), the vaccine is reviewed and changed from year to year. The World Health Organization (WHO) has already selected what components should be a part of the 2020 to 2021 vaccine to best protect against next season's soon-to-be circulating viruses, too. But again, there's no way yet to accurately predict how bad this coming year's flu will be as the virus is always changing.

Another thing to note? Talk of the flu shot's many side effects is greatly exaggerated. The flu shot can't actually give you the flu, and while there are some *possible* side effects, Dr. Adalja says most are rare.

If you're particularly wary of needles, you may prefer the nasal influenza spray (Flumist) over an injection, says Soma Mandal, MD, a board-certified internist at Summit Medical Group in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey. Potential nasal spray side effects include runny nose, wheezing, headache, vomiting, muscle aches, fever, sore throat, and cough.

"Not everyone should get the nasal flu spray due to factors like age and underlying health conditions, though, so talk to your doctor to determine if it's the best option for you," she says.

For the *actual* flu shot side effects to be aware of, read through this list. But then, roll up your sleeve anyway because flu season is coming. And guess what? The vaccine is still your best stay-healthy defense.

1. Shoulder soreness

If you receive the flu shot as an intramuscular injection (a.k.a. in your arm, typically), you have a 10 to 64 percent chance of experiencing some muscle soreness in your upper arm, according to the CDC.

That's because the needle is injected directly into the muscle, causing microscopic damage to the cells, and is designed to cause an inflammatory immune system response. You can take an OTC pain reliever while you wait for the soreness to fade, but if the pain is very noticeable or decreasing your mobility, Dr. Adalja recommends checking with your doctor.

2. Redness or swelling at the injection site

Anytime you pierce the skin and put something into the body it can cause a topical reaction, says Dr. Adalja. This is just a sign that your immune system is activating.

But this redness and swelling where you get your shot is a common side effect that only typically lasts a few days. It'll go away on its own, but if it's really bugging you, you can take ibuprofen (Advil) or acetaminophen (Tylenol).

3. Body aches

Any vaccine can cause body aches because of the way in which they activate the immune system, says Dr. Adalja.

If you're feeling sore in places other than your arm, it's usually nothing to worry about, though Dr. Adalja notes that the flu shot *does* take two weeks to become fully effective—so your body aches could be a sign of the actual flu, since viral strains are probably circulating around the time you get the vaccine.

4. Itching at the injection site or a full-body rash

This would signal an allergic reaction, but "it's very rare to have an allergic reaction to the flu shot," Dr. Adalja notes. "There are lots of myths about egg allergies and the vaccine," he explains—because most flu shots and nasal sprays are manufactured using technology that involves small amounts of egg proteins, per the [CDC](#).

"If you can eat scrambled eggs, you're not going to have a problem with the flu shot," Dr. Adalja says. If you have a confirmed egg allergy, you can likely still get the shot, the CDC says.

The caveat: If you experience severe itching at injection site, a rash all over your body, or signs of anaphylactic shock, seek immediate medical attention. And if you've had an allergic reaction to the flu shot in the past, you are among those few groups of people who the CDC recommends skip the flu shot.

5. Fever

You probably won't get a fever because of the vaccine, but if you do, it should be low-grade (i.e. less than 101 degrees). If it's higher than that, don't blame your flu shot—you probably have a totally unrelated illness. "Remember that you're

getting the vaccine at the height of respiratory virus season,” says Dr. Adalja. “So you may have been incubating another virus [without knowing it].”

And once again (for the people in the back!): The flu shot cannot give you the flu. While some flu vaccines contain virus strains, they're not live strains, so they can't get you sick. Meanwhile some flu shots don't contain the virus at all (they only contain a specific protein from the influenza virus), per the CDC.

6. Dizziness or fainting

This is less a side effect of the vaccine itself and more a side effect of a needle phobia, says Dr. Adalja. If you think you might have a stress reaction or faint, give your health care provider a heads up so they can make sure you stay seated after the shot to prevent injury.

7. Guillain-Barre syndrome

Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS) is an auto-immune disorder that's triggered by a wide variety of things, from vaccines to viral infections.

GBS causes damage to the nervous system, resulting in symptoms like muscle weakness, numbness, difficulty walking or an odd gait, and even paralysis, says Dr. Adalja. While 70 percent of people fully recover from the disorder, the recovery period can range from weeks to even years, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

But he also says the connection between GBS and the flu vaccine has been overhyped: “People should remember that influenza itself is much more likely to cause GBS than the vaccine.”

And since no more than one or two cases per million people vaccinated will have this side effect, it's better to take your (super small) chances with GBS than with one of the many common, severe complications that often come with the flu itself.

8. Severe allergic reaction

Any medication or vaccination has the potential for adverse effects including severe life-threatening reactions, says Dr. Mandal. Severe allergic reactions typically occur within a few hours of receiving the vaccine. These include hives, wheezing, shortness of breath, fast heart rate and dizziness.

“It is important to seek immediate medical attention if you develop any of these symptoms,” she says. It's definitely scary, but know that this side effect is super rare.

The bottom line: For most everyone, the flu shot is safe and only causes mild symptoms that are pretty much just annoying. The benefits of not getting the flu (and not spreading it to others who may be more vulnerable to the illness) far outweigh the risks of getting the shot.

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