
Don't Get Stuck: Pros and Cons About the Flu Shot

By Cristi Lewis, CHom.

It's that time of year: flu season. You've seen the signs at the pharmacy and the doctor's offices, and flu clinics are being set up everywhere. However, before you line up to get that shot, have you thought about whether the flu shot is the best option for you, or even if you need one?

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), approximately 36,000 people die each year from flu complications such as pneumonia. Most are in a "high risk category", which includes the very young, the very old, and the severely immune compromised. The CDC acknowledges that the flu shot will NOT PREVENT someone from getting the flu. Rather, it is recommended for these high risk individuals in order to lessen the severity of the symptoms should you happen to contract the illness.

Flu shots are specifically recommended by the CDC for adults over the age of 50, children ages 6 months to 4 years, pregnant women over the age of 18, and individuals who have compromised immune systems due to chronic illness or disease. Influenza vaccines come in two types; a shot in which inactivated influenza virus prompts the immune system to form antibodies to a particular strain of the flu, and a nasal mist that contains live influenza virus to which the body's immune system responds (this nasal vaccine, commonly known as FluMist, is ONLY recommended for healthy people ages 2-49 years who are NOT pregnant). You should NOT get vaccinated for the flu if you are sick with a fever, have an egg or mercury allergy, have a history of Guillian-Barre Syndrome in your family, are under 6 months old, or under 14 weeks pregnant.

Even if you are in a high risk category for complications from contracting the flu, there are several things to consider about the vaccine itself that may make it undesirable to be vaccinated:

1) Those groups recommended for the flu shot are also the ones most at risk from vaccine complications. These groups, justifiably, are in need of extra protection because immune function is compromised in some way. However, because of this lack of full immunity, they also are highest at risk for complications from the vaccines themselves. Side effects can range from swelling and soreness at the site of vaccination to full-blown flu. Serious complications can include the development of Guillian-Barre Syndrome, a rare but documented immune reaction involving the nerves and can cause numbness, tingling, loss of motor control, and partial paralysis.

2) Vaccines contain ingredients that may be detrimental to your health. The influenza vaccine is made by inoculating the fluid from chick embryos with a specific strain of the influenza virus. After being allowed to grow, the virus is inactivated with formaldehyde (a proven carcinogen) and preserved with Thimerosal, a mercury compound (known to cause neurological damage). These chemicals remain in the vaccine and are injected into your bloodstream along with the inactivated virus. Animal proteins are also included in the vaccine, and there is also no additional screening for animal viruses or disease material that may come from the chick embryos.

3) Vaccine flu strains may not protect you from the current year's virus. When a vaccine is formulated, scientists “guess” at which strains of the flu virus are most likely to infect people for that year, based upon early cases reported. They then include the top 3 viruses most likely to be encountered by the public in that year's vaccine. However, the influenza virus is known for rapidly changing its DNA structure as a survival mechanism. There is no guarantee that the strain of the flu for which you are vaccinated even matches the flu virus you may come in contact with, nor will it protect you from other bacteria or viruses that can cause flu-like symptoms.

If you are in a “high risk category,” it is worthwhile to consider whether the risk of contracting the flu is worth the risk of vaccination complications. If you are a healthy, active person, a flu shot is not your best choice for preventing influenza. Regardless of your health condition or age, choosing holistic health options that strengthen your immune system and promote overall health are best. They include:

1) Getting enough sleep. While 8 hours may not be what you need (some people need less, others more), you should make it a point to get the amount of good, restful sleep every night that makes you feel your best.

2) Avoiding sugar, white flour, and alcohol. Processed, refined foods (a.k.a. junk food and fast food) and soda depress your immune system, increasing your chances for contracting illness. Eat more whole grains and raw fruits and vegetables (or steamed, if cooked).

3) Hydrating! We are severely dehydrated as a nation, mostly due to our consumption of soda and coffee. Our bodies are 85% water, and every biochemical process that makes our body function relies on water. Try to drink at least 2 pints a day, especially in this dry fall weather when we turn on our heaters and stoves inside.

4) Getting outside. New studies are linking our immune health to adequate amounts of Vitamin D. Our bodies naturally make Vitamin D when our skin is exposed to direct sunlight. But because of decreasing sunlight and increasing cold during the winter months, we tend to get less than what we need. Try to be outside for at least 20 minutes a day to get enough exposure (without sunscreen, as it can hamper Vitamin D production).

5) Supplementing with Vitamin C, zinc, and immune boosting herbs.

Products such as Airborne and Emergen-C are great daily immune supplements if you happen to work in crowded, indoor environments such as in hospitals, schools, and offices. If you know you've been exposed to the flu, taking Echinacea after exposure will boost your immune function to provide extra protection (do not take longer than 3 weeks, as its efficacy decreases after this time). Also, taking the homeopathic remedy Oscillococcinum at the first signs of the flu may stave off full-blown flu symptoms and speed your recovery from illness.

Remember, flu vaccinations are a choice, not a mandate. Whether you choose to be vaccinated against influenza or not is up to you. Make it an informed decision that fits your individual health needs, and seek assistance and information from knowledgeable health care professionals dedicated to supporting your personal health care choices.

References:

The Center for Disease Control – Seasonal Flu Information
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>

The National Vaccine Information Center – Influenza
<http://www.909shot.com/Diseases/Influenza.htm>

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