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Don't Let COVID-19 Vaccine Confusion Keep You from Getting a Flu Vaccine This Fall



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Let's face it: there is a [confusing combination](#) of optimism and mistrust swirling around the progress to develop a vaccine for coronavirus. *When will it be ready?* you might be wondering. *How effective will it be? Should I get it?*

This confusion comes at a time when many people's approach to their own health care has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, even if they have not been touched by the virus itself. Nearly half of Americans say they decided to skip or postpone medical care because of the pandemic, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation [tracking poll](#) in June, although most said they planned to return to care in the following months.

I hope for many — especially vulnerable seniors at higher risk of developing serious complications from flu — that care includes getting a regular flu shot this fall.

While there seem to be more questions than answers about the work-in-progress coronavirus vaccine, the flu vaccine has been around for decades, with updates made to it each year, so answers to your questions about it are easier to come by.

Indeed, one of our most powerful tools to combat health care anxiety and confusion is information. Health care literacy is especially important for those who are most vulnerable to serious complications from influenza, which includes people age 65+ and adults with chronic health conditions, [according to the CDC](#). At the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#), where I work, we see every day how education empowers people to bridge the gap between *receiving* advice in the doctor's office and *following* that advice in their daily life at home.

To make an informed decision about vaccination for yourself, in conjunction with your care provider, it helps to learn all you can about the flu shot and then think carefully about how it fits into your own health care picture and wellness goals, especially amid the confusion that the coronavirus pandemic has wrought.

How does a vaccine work?

Vaccines [train your body](#) to recognize a pathogen, such as a virus, and trigger the immune response your body needs to fight that invader when it appears. Typically, vaccines take a very small portion of the virus itself, in a weakened or killed state, and introduce it to your body. The immune system then produces antibodies against that particular invader, so if the virus does come your way, your body knows what to do. This immune response prevents you from getting the illness, or prompts a milder response if you do get it.

Because the flu virus in humans keeps evolving, new flu vaccines are released every year to work against the several strains that are expected to be most prevalent that year. Last year's vaccine, therefore, may not protect you against this year's flu, say [experts at the Mayo Clinic](#).

How is the flu vaccine different from the vaccine for the coronavirus?

The first very big difference is that successful flu vaccines have been around for decades — ever since Jonas Salk [developed the first one in the 1940s](#). So each year, including this one, a carefully vetted flu vaccine is widely available to the public.

The coronavirus, on the other hand, is a [novel virus](#) that was never experienced in humans before late 2019. Therefore, scientists have only recently begun to develop a vaccine for it. While there are a number of candidates now moving into so-called Phase 3 trials, which means they're being tested for efficacy in tens of thousands of healthy adults, exactly when an effective coronavirus vaccine will be generally available is not known at this time, according to [The New York Times](#).

What are the benefits of a flu vaccine?

A flu vaccine helps prevent people from getting severely ill with the flu. According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), the 2018–2019 flu vaccine prevented an estimated 4.4 million influenza illnesses, 2.3 million flu-related medical visits, 58,000 flu-related hospitalizations, and 3,500 flu-related deaths. The benefits reach all ages, reducing children's risk of flu-related intensive care admission by 74% in recent years and adults' risk by 82%, says the CDC.

How is this flu season — coming in the midst of a pandemic — different from previous seasons?

While experts have always recommended flu vaccines to minimize severe illness, especially for at-risk groups, the recommendation is even stronger this year for several reasons, including [trying to prevent](#):

- Hospitals and emergency rooms from getting overwhelmed, having to care for people with severe influenza on top of bracing for an additional wave of COVID-19 patients;
- Individuals, especially the elderly and those with underlying conditions, from getting both influenza and COVID-19 at once.

It is interesting to note that the Southern hemisphere, which experiences the height of its flu season in July, reported a [very mild flu season this year](#).

With a milder 2020 flu season in the Southern hemisphere, why is it still important that I get a flu shot?

Scientists are investigating whether the travel restrictions, preventive health measures and social distancing brought on by the coronavirus have played a role in mitigating the spread of flu during the Southern hemisphere's winter. As they search for answers, health experts still recommend [taking necessary precautions to avoid the flu](#) — because, as one health expert says, “influenza surprises us.”

What are my next steps?

September and October are good times to get the flu vaccine, according to the CDC. Educate and empower yourself to make the best choice for your health. As always, it's best to make your health care decisions in conversation with your care provider. Ask your provider whether you should get the flu vaccine and what side-effects to watch for.

The AARP has [many good tips](#). They include the benefits of scheduling your vaccine early in the season — mid-September through October — and early in the day, citing a study that showed adults 65+ who received a shot between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. produced more protective antibodies.

Here are additional places to learn more about the “who, what and where” of getting a flu shot:

- The [Centers for Disease Control](#), for overall information and guidelines
- The [Visiting Nurse Service of New York's](#) primer on flu prevention
- [New York State Department of Health's](#) guidelines, including an interactive map to find a flu vaccine provider near you
- [New York City](#) guidelines, including an interactive map to find a flu vaccine provider near you