

## Don't Skip That Flu Shot

It's more important than ever this year. Here's why.

September 19, 2020

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Fever, chills, congestion, body aches, sore throat. Is it a cold? Allergies? The flu? Covid-19? Without a test it can be tough to know, which is one reason it's especially important to get a flu shot this season, experts say.

During the **2019-20 flu season**, the U.S. saw more than 400,000 Americans hospitalized and anywhere between 24,000 and 62,000 deaths from influenza, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"Symptoms of Covid-19 can be very similar to influenza," says Rohit Modak, chairman of **Virginia Hospital Center Physician Group's Infectious**

**Diseases** group. "It will be very hard to tell the difference based on symptoms alone. Unless a clear diagnosis is made through testing, which may not be available to everyone, medical practitioners must consider both conditions, and quarantine all patients when possible so they don't spread either virus."

The flu vaccine, available now at many doctors' offices, clinics, pharmacies and grocery stores, can help reduce the likelihood of becoming sick and stressing about not knowing what you have—not to mention the chances of having to quarantine.

"The vaccine works, will help people stay healthy, and will allow people to continue day-to-day activities safely," Modak says.

New research out of Europe suggests that the flu may also be linked with the spread and severity of the novel coronavirus. The authors of one study found that **higher rates of flu vaccination have been linked with lower death rates from Covid-19**, according to Matthieu Domenech de Cellès of the Max Planck Institute for Infection Biology in Berlin. Another study of found that those who received the flu vaccine were less likely to test positive for Covid-19.

Social distancing and mask-wearing may help reduce the spread of both Covid-19 and the flu, Modak says, although to what degree is unclear.

“If our community continues to social distance and wear masks, that should make the flu season less severe than it has been in the past,” he says. “However, in the midst of this pandemic, we are still seeing plenty of new cases of Covid-19. Some in our community are not doing a good job of social distancing and masking. Our behavior will directly affect what we see in this year’s flu season.”

One of the best defenses against the flu is the flu shot, which has been updated to fend off the specific strains expected to circulate in the U.S. during the 2020-21 season. The CDC expects manufacturers to provide 194 million to 198 million doses this season—surpassing the record 175 million doses provided during the 2019-20 flu season.

Modak says the notion that the flu vaccine makes people sick is a myth.

“It is not a live virus vaccine,” he says. “Some people can have mild symptoms after receiving the vaccine, including arm pain, low-grade fever and some achiness. But considering the millions of Americans who contract the flu every year, the hundreds of thousands who are hospitalized and the tens of thousands who die, the vaccine is absolutely worth the risk of an adverse event.”

**Getting vaccinated** against the flu also safeguards health care resources, such as intensive-care unit beds, by reducing the likelihood that hospitals will be overtaxed by an influx of influenza patients concurrently with Covid-19 patients.

Because flu season has no official start and end dates, the best time to get the flu shot is now, Modak says—especially vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, pregnant women and anyone with underlying conditions such as chronic lung or heart disease.

Individuals who’ve had Covid-19 could also be at higher risk of severe illness if they get the flu.

“Although some people with Covid-19 don’t even know they are infected, many people will have a difficult course, which can result in prolonged complications,” Modak says. “Anything that creates an inflammatory response can weaken the immune system and make it harder to deal with subsequent illnesses.”

The vaccine is important for healthy people, too.

“As a primary care physician, I strongly recommend the flu vaccine for all of my patients, regardless of age or coexisting conditions,” says Chris Walsh, chief medical officer for Virginia Hospital Center Physician Group’s Primary Care Division. “While patients with weakened immune systems or chronic illness, such as asthma, heart disease and diabetes, benefit from the risk reduction of a flu vaccine, it is equally important to vaccinate healthy individuals who could expose vulnerable friends and family. Vaccines provide us with a way to reduce risk and prevent disease.”

Area pharmacies that provide flu shots include CVS, Giant Food, Harris Teeter, Walgreens, Wegmans, Preston’s Pharmacy and McLean Pharmacy. Many offer them for free and/or with benefits. Safeway offers 10% off a grocery purchase with immunization. CVS in Target stores provides a \$5 coupon.