

6 reasons patients avoid flu vaccination

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Sara Berg, MS

Senior News Writer

With flu season here and the ongoing battle against COVID-19, it is imperative that everyone get the influenza vaccine. However, it is likely that most of your patients who have not yet received an influenza vaccination for the current flu season simply have not made the time to do so. But there is another group of patients who seem to have a ready set of explanations for why they ought to skip vaccination each flu season. Here are the rationales these patients might offer up and how you can respond.

I'm healthy, so I don't need a flu vaccine

It is true that certain groups of patients—those who are pregnant, young children, seniors and patients with chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes or asthma—are at higher risk of severe complications from flu infection. But the flu is a contagious disease that can lead to other serious illnesses, such as pneumonia.

“Any flu infection can carry a risk of serious complications, hospitalization or death, even among otherwise healthy children and adults,” notes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes. “Therefore, getting vaccinated is a safer choice than risking illness to obtain immune protection.”

Explore nine questions your patients may have about the flu vaccine.

The flu vaccine isn't safe and can give me the flu

Flu vaccines are safe, as shown by more than 50 years of research and experience among hundreds of millions of Americans who have been immunized against influenza. There are some common side effects, such as swelling or redness from the shot, muscle aches, fever and nausea. But those should

not be mistaken for influenza, which sends between 140,000 and 810,000 Americans to the hospital annually since 2010, according to the CDC.

Flu vaccines cannot cause flu illness. Flu vaccines given with a needle (i.e., flu shots) are made with either inactivated (killed) viruses, or with only a single protein from the flu virus. The nasal spray vaccine contains live viruses that are attenuated, or weakened, so that they will not cause illness. However, you may still catch a non-flu virus. Non-flu cold viruses cannot be prevented by an influenza vaccine. And since it takes two weeks for the protective effects of the flu vaccination to kick in, you can still catch the flu during that time period.

Learn more from the AMA about eight things doctors wish patients knew about flu shots.

It is better to get sick with the flu

“No,” the CDC warns. Anyone can get sick with the flu and experience serious complications. Though the U.S. death toll from influenza varies from year to year, the CDC estimates between 12,000 and 61,000 deaths annually since 2010.

Even if your illness is relatively mild and brief, others may not be so lucky and you can spread the flu to them. That is especially concerning because some patients catch the flu but show no symptoms. Not knowing they have the flu, they are not as careful as they would otherwise be in protecting family, friends, neighbors and co-workers from potential exposure.

“Getting a flu vaccine during 2020–2021 is more important than ever because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic,” the CDC says. “Flu vaccination is especially important for people who are at high risk from flu; many of whom are also at high risk for COVID-19 or serious outcomes.”

Discover the six ways physicians can do boost flu vaccination among children.

I’ll wait until flu hits my area

As mentioned above, it takes two weeks after flu vaccination for your body to develop the antibodies that protect you against influenza. Because of that, trying to time your vaccination to when the flu starts to circulate in your community is no simple task.

It is important to note, though, that if you have not been vaccinated by the end of November, it can still be protective to get the flu vaccine. This is because the flu is unpredictable and has varying seasons, typically peaking between December and March, but occurring as late as May, says the CDC.

Follow these six tips to win over the undecideds for flu vaccination.

I hate getting injections

While needles are no fun, a trip to the hospital or a couple of weeks in bed are no picnic either. And as already stated, it can be even worse than that. Any little discomfort that you may feel from the flu shot is nothing compared to the suffering caused by influenza, the CDC says.

The flu can make you sick for several days, send you to the hospital or worse. For those who do not like shots, the nasal spray flu vaccine may be a good alternative.

“This season, getting a flu vaccine has the added benefit of reducing the overall burden on the health care system and saving medical resources for care of COVID-19 patients,” says the CDC. “If you haven’t gotten your flu vaccine yet, get vaccinated now.”

Find out why it’s so important to get patients vaccinated to help avoid a double whammy flu season.

I was vaccinated last year

Influenza viruses are changing all the time and flu vaccines are updated seasonally to afford the best possible protection against the virus strains that experts predict will circulate widely during flu season.

In addition, the protection from last year’s vaccine fades with time. The CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine for everyone 6 months of age and older because a person’s immune protection from vaccination declines over time. An annual vaccination allows for the best protection against the flu, says the CDC.