

Is it *Really* Flu Season?

by Dr. Cathy Wendland-Colby

Fall is in full swing – the mornings are cold and crisp, afternoons are sunny and still a little warm, and the nights are cool enough to close the windows and turn up the heat. The leaves are turning, with beautiful red and gold trees everywhere. Halloween has passed, Thanksgiving is on its way, and before you know it, Christmas will be here. With so many reasons to enjoy fall, why is it the drug companies have begun referring to this time of year as Flu Season? *Is it really that bad?*

We all know that influenza (the flu) can make you feel pretty lousy. Symptoms usually come on suddenly and can include

- fever (usually high)
- fatigue
- muscle aches
- chills
- headache
- nausea, vomiting, diarrhea in children
- runny or stuffy nose
- sore throat
- cough (sometimes dry)

Having these symptoms does not always mean that you have the flu. Many different illnesses, including the common cold, can have similar symptoms.

According to the CDC, approximately **5% - 20%** of Americans will get the flu this year. Although the flu can make you feel bad enough to stay in bed for about a week, none of its symptoms are deadly. While the reports are designed to make you believe that thousands of people die from the flu, the facts prove otherwise. People are not dying from the flu; people who have compromised immune systems have a difficult time fighting the flu virus and are more susceptible to other illnesses. The CDC resourcefully lists these other illnesses as flu-related complications.

How can you protect yourself from getting the flu?

- 1 - Practice good health habits. Get plenty of sleep, exercise regularly, get adjusted regularly, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- 2 - Clean your hands. Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. Also, clean surfaces of everyday items such as cell phones, steering wheels, computer keyboards, remote controls...
- 3 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

4 - Keep your distance. Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too. If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from catching your illness.

Should you get a flu shot?

The flu shot is an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle, usually in the arm. It contains three influenza viruses. The three vaccine strains – one A (H3N2) virus, one A (H1N1) virus, and one B virus – are representative of the influenza vaccine strains recommended for that year. Vaccines used in 2004 and 2005 were later realized to have contained the wrong type of influenza strain and therefore were not very successful in preventing the flu.

Are there risks with the flu shot?

At best, the vaccines have about a 70 - 80% chance of preventing the flu if the strain used in the vaccine is the same as the strain which is going around that year. Please note: you have already developed your own immunities to influenza if you've been exposed to it before, but, the different strains that go around each year may affect you if you have not been exposed to them before, just like the vaccine. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, can sometimes cause serious problems, including severe allergic reactions. According to the CDC, *“fever, malaise, myalgia, and other systemic symptoms* can occur after vaccination with inactivated vaccine and most often affect persons who have had no previous exposure to the influenza virus antigens in the vaccine. These reactions begin 6 - 12 hours after vaccination and can persist for 1 - 2 days. Some individuals who get the shot still get the virus, but it's usually a milder case than it would have been without the inoculation, coincidental respiratory disease unrelated to influenza vaccination can occur after vaccination.”

Did I read that right? If you get the vaccine, and you haven't before been exposed to that strain of influenza, you will get the same symptoms (*fever, fatigue, muscle aches and others*) as getting the flu?

A published review of the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) documented that in children aged 6 - 23 months, the most frequently reported adverse events were fever, rash, injection-site reactions, and seizures.

Life-threatening allergic reactions are very rare, but can include breathing problems, hoarseness or wheezing, hives, paleness, weakness, a fast heartbeat, dizziness, seizures and death.

Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), an illness characterized by fever, nerve damage, paralysis and muscle weakness, has been associated with flu vaccines since the 1976 swine flu vaccine.

Autism has been linked to the Thimerosal and Mercury used as preservatives in vaccines, including the majority of flu vaccines distributed in the United States. More than

500,000 kids currently suffer from autism, and pediatricians diagnose more than 40,000 new cases every year. The disease was unknown until 1943, when it was identified and diagnosed among eleven children born in the months after Thimerosal was first added to baby vaccines in 1931.

As you can see, the decision to vaccinate must take into account the various side effects that are possible. As with all health decisions, you must first weigh the benefits against the potential dangers. The CDC, National Vaccine Information Center and VAERS are just a few of the resources you can use for determining if a particular vaccine is right for you.

Ultimately, the course you take in limiting your chances of getting the flu is up to you. The internet has many web sites devoted to why or why not to vaccinate. Learn more about the flu vaccine before you find yourself at one of the many drive up flu shot clinics.

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/habits.htm>

http://www.heartspring.net/vaccine_contamination.html

<http://www.nvic.org/Diseases/Influenza.htm>

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