

Think it's "Just" the Flu? Think Again

Ignorance regarding influenza can be dangerous or even deadly for you and your loved ones.

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Most people lump colds and flu into the same category. During "cold and flu season," many of us expect to catch a cold or come down with a "flu bug," and consider it no big deal. These casual attitudes wrongly presume the flu is little more than a very bad cold. Nothing could be further from the truth. Influenza is a serious viral infection that is far more serious than the common cold. A little known statistic drives the point home: Influenza claims more lives each year than all vaccine-preventable diseases combined.

Cold or Flu – What's the Difference?

Even though both the cold and flu can cause congestion and fatigue, the similarities end there. The common cold is easily treated with over-the-counter medicines — even the anecdotal chicken soup remedy can make you feel better. Plus, there are no annual fatality statistics associated with the cold virus; people simply don't die from head and chest colds. Flu, on the other hand, is a deadly viral infection linked to tens of thousands of deaths each year. Flu can lead to serious complications like pneumonia, and leave you feeling weak and incapacitated for weeks. But perhaps the most significant difference between the common cold and the flu is that the flu is actually preventable. There is no certain way to avoid catching a cold, but a simple annual vaccine is all it takes to prevent influenza. Experts agree that getting an annual flu shot is the single best way to prevent the spread of flu.

Even though flu vaccines are affordable, safe and widely available, statistics show that many people still choose to forego vaccination, putting themselves, their loved ones and their communities at risk. While there are likely many reasons for this

troubling trend, the root causes still seem steeped in various "myths" surrounding flu vaccines.

Putting Flu Myths to Rest

Many myths about flu vaccine still exist, despite widespread public health efforts to dispel misinformation. For example, some people still think you can catch the flu from a flu shot. But the virus strain used in a flu vaccine is inactive; that means contracting the flu from a flu shot is as likely as being bitten by a dead mosquito. Other people think if they are young and healthy, they don't need a flu shot. But consider this: Of the 60-plus million people infected by last year's H1N1 flu virus,¹ the majority of fatalities were children, teens and young healthy adults. Still others avoid flu shots because they are not in a perceived high-risk group. This year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has simplified its guidelines for flu vaccination to address this confusion: Currently, everyone 6 months and older is urged to get vaccinated. So what's your excuse?

If you are still not convinced a flu shot is for you, here are several well-documented reasons for getting your flu shot scheduled right away:

- Flu is nothing to sneeze at: Influenza and pneumonia are the eighth-leading cause of death in the United States.
- The flu is costly. A bad case of the flu can last for days, even weeks, causing fever, chills, headache, cough and sore muscles. If you are a parent and spread the virus to your kids, expect to miss work even longer ➤



while caring for them. And if a hospital stay is required, your expenses will skyrocket.

- The flu can put people you love at risk. Even if you are convinced you “never get the flu,” your decision to forgo immunization could put elderly parents, grandparents neighbors or co-workers at risk. If you don’t get immunized to protect yourself, consider your role in protecting those who might get sick by being around you.
- Flu shots are completely safe and effective. Despite myths to the contrary, it is impossible to get the flu from a flu vaccine. When you get a flu shot, you help your entire community stay safe and flu-free.

For the 2012-13 flu season, the flu vaccine’s trivalent formulation contains three strains of the flu virus identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as being prevalent. These strains are: influenza A (California H1N1 like virus), influenza A (Victoria H3N2 like virus) and influenza B (Wisconsin like virus). That means that even if you received a flu vaccine last year, you will need to get vaccinated again this year to ensure you are protected against all three strains. Call your healthcare provider today to schedule your flu shot and halt the spread of this deadly disease.

1: The Centers For Disease Control and Prevention archive. Accessed at http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/estimates_2009_h1n1.htm.