

Pediatrician shares why children need flu shots

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It's a common question parents ask themselves this time of year: Does my child really need a flu shot? Though the flu may seem harmless, the truth on average 20,000 children age 5 and younger are hospitalized due to flu symptoms each year.

"The flu can be deadly, especially in children under the age of 5, and those who have certain health conditions, such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease," said Kevin Polsley, MD, Loyola University Health System pediatrician and assistant professor of pediatrics at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine. "But even if your child doesn't have risk factors, he or she could still develop potentially fatal complications from the flu."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that nearly half of the children who died last year from the flu had no risk factors. Influenza is a highly contagious virus. As cold weather begins to set in and with people spending more time indoors in confined spaces, the chances of contracting the flu increases.

"The best way to protect kids from the flu and its potentially deadly symptoms is a [flu shot](#)," Polsley said. "Schools and day-care centers are perfect environments for the flu to spread. But just because your child doesn't go to school is not a guarantee they won't get the flu. It's everywhere."

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that every child 6

months or older get a flu shot.

“It’s best to get the shot in the fall before we start to see a lot of flu activity because it takes two weeks for the body to develop an antibody response,” Polsley said.

If the thought of another shot is too much to take, a nasal spray also is available. Polsley says both are safe for healthy children ages 2 and older.

Still, a flu shot is preferred if the child:

- Has a suppressed immune system
- Has a lung disease
- Has close contact with someone who has a suppressed immune system

To keep children under the age of 6 months safe from the flu, he suggests:

- Ensure everyone who touches the baby has washed their hands
- Keep the baby away from people who are known to be sick

Also, mothers who breastfeed give their child protection against many infectious diseases because breast milk has antibodies that are passed from mother to child.

“Younger [children](#) may not have the same kind of flu symptoms as adults,” Polsley said.

He suggests parents watch out for:

- A high-grade fever up to 104 degrees Fahrenheit
- Chills and shakes with the fever
- Extreme tiredness
- Headache and body aches
- Dry, hacking cough
- Sore throat
- Vomiting and belly pain

Though the most common way to treat the flu, like most viral illnesses, is with rest and hydration, he suggests contacting your physician immediately if you feel your child may be experiencing severe symptoms.

“I can hear it coming, ‘but the flu shot gave me the flu.’ This is impossible. You cannot get the flu from a flu shot because the flu shot is made from an inactivated virus,” Polsley said. “It is possible to experience some mild side effects, but if you’ve ever had the flu you will know the side effects are nothing compared to the real illness. People who have had the [flu](#) in the past take the least convincing to get a shot because they never want to have it again.”

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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