

Separate the facts from flu fiction

November 1 2011, By Liz Szabo

Amanda Kanowitz was a healthy 4-year-old when she got the flu. Her first symptoms-cough, low fever, vomiting - seemed like signs of any common childhood bug, and the doctor suggested fluids and rest. Three days later, her parents found her lifeless in her bed.

Today, seven years after Amanda's death, her parents are passionate advocates for vaccines and work to dispel myths that allow kids to die from a preventable disease,

"The [flu](#) can kill healthy children," says Richard Kanowitz of Scarsdale, N.Y., who founded Families Fighting Flu in Amanda's memory. "The only way to prevent it is to get vaccinated."

When Amanda died, doctors didn't recommend kids her age get a shot. Kanowitz helped to change that, after meeting doctors and federal officials. Today, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) recommends flu shots for everyone over 6 months old.

Yet relatively few get them. Last year, only 43 percent of Americans got a flu shot, and that was a record year. In developed countries, flu kills more people than any other vaccine-preventable disease, says pediatrician Jon Abramson of Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

This year, 42 percent of consumers say they plan to skip the flu shot, according to a new survey of nearly 1,500 adults by CVS pharmacy, which shared survey results exclusively with USA Today.

Experts talk about some of the most common myths:

Myth 1: The flu is just a bad cold.

A cold is an annoyance. The flu kills up to 49,000 people a year and hospitalizes 200,000, the CDC says. Last year, 114 children died. [Flu symptoms](#) tend to appear suddenly, unlike a cold. People who get H1N1 ([swine flu](#)) are often laid up for a week with fever, body aches, sore throat, fatigue, headaches and a runny or congested nose, says the CDC.

Myth 2: The flu shot causes the flu.

About 35 percent of consumers think the flu vaccine can cause flu, CVS found. But that's impossible, CDC says, because the viruses in the flu shot are dead. Its most common side effect is a sore arm. Mist nasal spray contains weakened viruses, so they don't cause severe symptoms, either. Side effects in kids can include a runny nose, wheezing and headache.

Myth 3: New "combined" shots are riskier than older ones.

This year's shot, which protects against both H1N1 and seasonal flu, was made the same way as every other flu shot, says Randy Bergen of Kaiser Permanente in Walnut Creek, Calif. Every year, vaccine makers include viral strains that are most likely to cause illness. Typically, these include two influenza A strains—an H1N1 and an H3N2 - and a strain of influenza B, Abramson says.

Myth 4: Only sickly people need a [flu shot](#).

Half of consumers think flu shots are only for kids or sick people, CVS found. Actually, the most vulnerable members of society, such as newborns or those with weak immune systems, often can't get flu shots.

The only way to protect them is to vaccinate everyone around them, keeping flu viruses out of circulation, Bergen says. Because babies can't be vaccinated until they're 6 months old, they depend on vaccinated friends and family members to create a "cocoon" of protection , Bergen says.

Myth 5: Flu shots contain toxic chemicals such as mercury.

About 14 percent of those surveyed said flu shots were dangerous. Concerns about mercury have revolved around a preservative called thimerosal, once commonly used in vaccines but mostly phased out since 2001 . Today, no thimerosal is added to FluMist nasal spray or to flu shots from single-dose containers, says Paul Offit, infectious-disease expert at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Companies add thimerosal to only [flu vaccine](#) stored in multi-dose vials, to prevent fungus or other potentially dangerous germs, Bergen says. There's no evidence that the low levels of thimerosal in shots cause any harm, says Offit. Thimerosal contains ethyl mercury, not methyl mercury, the type that can cause brain damage, he says. The low levels of ethyl mercury found in multi-dose flu shots have never been shown to cause harm, Offit says. There's also no data to prove that thimerosal causes autism, either, Offit adds. In fact, seven studies now refute that idea. Offit notes that flu shots don't use aluminum, which is used in other vaccines as an "adjuvant" to stimulate a stronger immune response.

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