

Dispelling common myths about the flu vaccine

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Every fall, people wonder whether to get an influenza or flu shot.

Some people get them faithfully while others refuse, many because of the various myths that surround the vaccine.

Since the benefits outweigh the potential side effects, Dr. Cindy Whitener, infectious disease specialist at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, recommends everyone get the flu shot. Whitener dispels a few [myths](#) that prevent skeptics from being vaccinated:

The flu shot will give me the flu.

False: "Some people will get a local reaction where they get the shot, and some might feel achy or feverish for a day or two," Whitener said. "That isn't actual flu, but a reaction to the components in the vaccine."

I don't need the flu shot every year.

False: "Since our antibody response wanes a bit each year we need that boost," Whitener said. In addition, the [viral strains](#) that circulate vary from year to year so flu shots differ yearly. Researchers predict which three strains are most likely to circulate and the shot is adjusted accordingly.

It's too late to get the shot.

False: "Since you cannot predict when flu is going to hit a certain region, there's no deadline," Whitener said. While flu is commonly expected in January or February, [influenza](#) is possible nine months out of the year (September through May), so the vaccine is often offered through spring. Once flu has hit the area, it's still not too late, although it takes about two weeks for the shot to be effective.

I've already had the flu so I don't need the shot.

False: "Unfortunately, it is possible to get the flu more than once because of the multiple strains that circulate," Whitener said. "If you've already had it, it's worth getting a flu shot to protect yourself from those other strains. In addition, people think they've had the flu but really it was a different, flu-like [virus](#)."

It's just the flu. I don't need my doctor.

False: People should call their doctor if they believe they have the flu early on, especially if they have underlying medical conditions or if the patient is older than 65 or younger than 2. Antiviral medicines, if given early, can lessen symptoms and shorten the duration of the illness.

"People need to see their doctor if they're having fevers beyond a day or two and they believe they're getting worse rather than better," Whitener said. High fever and trouble breathing are of particular concern.

Expectant mothers should not get the flu.

False: The opposite is true. Doctors recommend flu shots for pregnant women because of a high risk of severe illness. There's no evidence supporting increased risk to the baby if a flu shot is given to the mother.

While Whitener recommends that everyone get a [flu](#) shot, the people

who need the vaccine most are anyone older than 65, young children, pregnant women, anyone with underlying medical conditions, and anyone who comes in contact with people at risk including family members and health care workers. It is not recommended for anyone with a severe egg allergy (there are traces of egg in the vaccine) and anyone who has experienced a severe reaction to the [flu shot](#) in the past. Both situations are serious and should be discussed with a doctor.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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