

3Qs: What to know about this year's flu season

January 14 2013, by Casey Bayer



Health officials say this year's flu outbreak is the worst in a decade, and Boston on Wednesday declared a public health emergency as the flu epidemic worsened. Forty-one states are currently experiencing widespread flu activity, and Massachusetts is one of 29 states reporting high levels of flu-like illness. We asked Mark Douglass, an associate clinical professor of pharmacy in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences, how people can

protect themselves from the flu and why they should get vaccinated if they haven't already.

What has accounted for the spike in flu activity this year, and how do health officials account for the new strain each year?

The reasons behind the increase in this year's flu activity are not definitively clear at this time and can be the result of several factors. However, we are seeing increased physician office visits and hospitalizations which could be due to a more severe circulating [flu strain](#) this year. Additionally, there may be several individuals who either delayed or decided not to obtain the flu vaccine after a very mild 2011–2012 flu season.

The composition of the vaccine itself changes from year to year, and these changes are based on laboratory data and estimates provided by experts at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, and the Food and Drug Administration on the [flu virus activity](#) patterns around the world.

The data that has been gathered so far for the 2012–13 flu season indicates that this year's flu vaccine will provide good protection for the most common strains of the circulating flu virus.

What symptoms should people be on the lookout for, and how can people protect themselves from getting the flu?

Flu-like symptoms can vary from person to person, but many people with the flu will experience a cough, sore throat, runny nose, chills or sweating, fever, headache, general body aches and pains, and a general

feeling of fatigue or exhaustion. Most people can expect their flu symptoms to persist from a few days or for up to two weeks. Because influenza is a virus and not a bacteria, antibiotics do not work against the flu, so they should not be prescribed or taken for this condition.

The best protection against the flu is to minimize your risk of coming into contact with the virus. The flu virus can easily be spread by coming into contact with contaminated surfaces and inhaling the aerosolized droplets from people coughing or sneezing nearby.

Here are some steps to minimize your risk: Get a flu vaccine; wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20–30 seconds or use gel hand sanitizers as an alternative; avoid touching your face to minimize getting the virus through your mouth and nose; keep your distance from those who are sick; and don't share common household items like keyboards, remotes, or phones.

And remember, cover your nose and mouth when coughing, and stay home if you have the flu to avoid passing it on to others.

You noted that some people are reluctant to get the flu vaccine. What is recommended, and is it too late to get one now?

An annual influenza vaccine is recommended for everyone over the age of six months and especially those who are at high risk of developing the flu, including children, the elderly, pregnant women, or those with chronic diseases.

It is not too late to get the vaccine. [Flu season](#) typically begins in the fall and can persist into March and April, but can be as late as May. There is an intranasal formulation available for those who may be squeamish

about needles.

Despite the benefits of the flu vaccine, a common misconception exists that the flu vaccine causes the flu. This is simply false. Influenza vaccine is manufactured from a dead or inactivated form of the flu virus. Individuals who develop the flu shortly after receiving the vaccine could have contracted the flu just before, or shortly after, vaccine administration. It is important to note that the maximum benefits of the [flu](#) vaccine can take up to two weeks to develop while the body establishes immunity to the [flu virus](#) strains.

Provided by Northeastern University

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