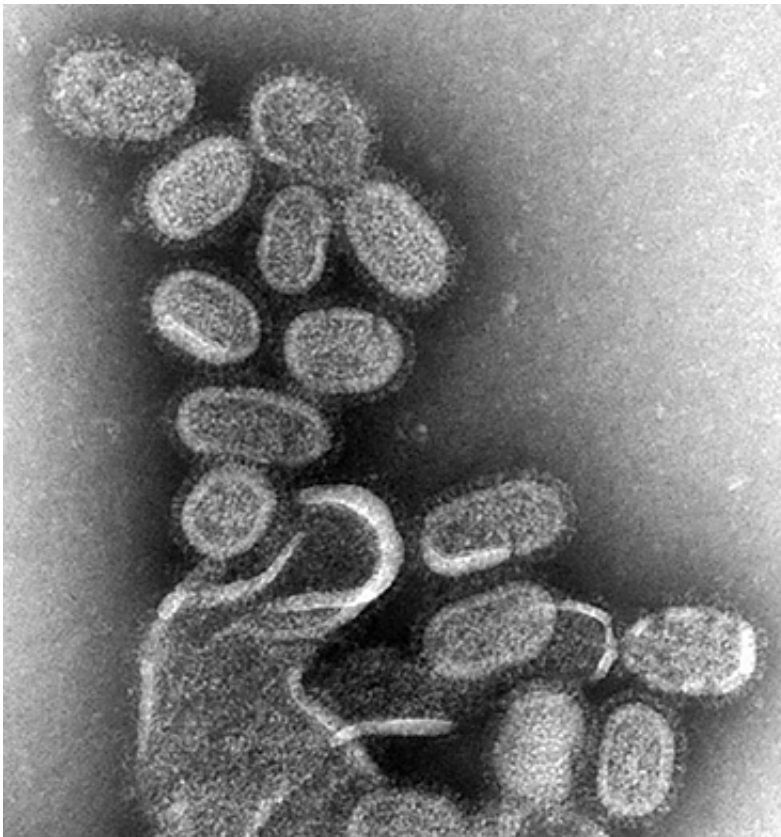


Many Americans unsure that flu shots do any good, poll finds

December 16 2015, by Crocker Stephenson, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel



Electron microscopy of influenza virus. Credit: CDC

With the height of the influenza season fast approaching, a survey published Tuesday by the federal Department of Health and Human Services found a sizable number of Americans are skeptical that a flu shot makes much of a difference.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year.

Paul Biedrzycki, director of [disease control](#) and environmental health at the Milwaukee Health Department, said not only is the vaccine a powerful preventative, it reduces the severity of [flu symptoms](#) and tamps down spread of the disease.

"It's still the best tool we have," he said.

But less than half of those surveyed -43 percent-said they strongly believed a [flu vaccination](#) would help protect them from the illness and nearly a third -32 percent-said they didn't think it would.

The Harris Poll online survey was conducted in mid-October among 2,225 adults. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in Harris Poll surveys, no sampling error could be calculated.

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by viruses that infect the nose throat and mouth. The illness can be mild to severe and at times it causes complications that lead to death.

Last year and the year before, Biedrzycki said, Milwaukee's [flu season](#) peaked over the holidays.

This year's flu season has had a later start.

As of Tuesday, there have been three flu-related hospitalizations, he said. As of this time last year, he said, there had been 55 hospitalizations.

"We're at the beginning," he said.

He predicted the peak of the season would come in January.

Flu viruses are constantly changing, Biedrzycki said. Because the vaccines must be developed months before the illness arrives, vaccines are more effective in some years than in others.

The [medical community](#) shoots for an effectiveness rate of about 60 percent. Last year's rate was particularly low: 23 percent.

"So far this year," Biedrzycki said, "the vaccine has proved effective."

The Harris Poll found another disconnect between the medical community and the general public.

Public health officials urge those sick with the [flu](#) to stay home from work or school to prevent spreading the disease, which can be particularly harmful to infants and elderly people.

But 66 percent of those surveyed said they try to tough it out and continue going to work.

"Stay home," Biedrzycki said. "It's not only about protecting yourself, its about protecting other people, too."

While the CDC recommends that people get vaccinated as soon as the serum is available, Biedrzycki said it's still not too late to get a shot.

"Absolutely not," he said. "You can get vaccinated right through the [season](#)."

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