

## Avoid the 'twindemic': Get your flu shot now

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(HealthDay)—The best time to get your flu shot is now if you want to protect yourself against a potential "twindemic" infection of influenza and COVID-19, experts say.

"Early September, at the very least early October, is the best time to get your [flu shot](#). That really allows your body to build up the appropriate immune response in time for the peak prevalence of influenza in the community," Dr. Nadia Eltaki, director of clinical operations for Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington, D.C., said during an [HD Live! interview](#) on Tuesday.

A massive effort is underway to get as many people as possible inoculated with the seasonal flu vaccine, to reduce the risk of combination influenza/COVID-19 epidemics overwhelming local or regional health systems in the United States.

The "twindemic" risk to individuals is twofold, Eltaki said.

Infection with either virus will deal your immune system such a blow that you will be more susceptible to a more savage follow-up bout with the other, Eltaki said.

"One virus can weaken your [immune system](#) enough to make you susceptible to the other virus or any other respiratory virus or illness," Eltaki said. Your body will be less able to stave off initial infection or to hold the line against a cascading viral onslaught throughout your body, she said.

Worse, some people could be unlucky enough to contract both viruses at the same time, Eltaki added.

"Unfortunately, it is possible to contract both the influenza virus and the novel coronavirus," she said. "If you are infected with both viruses together, the resulting impact could lead to even more severe outcomes than either infection independently."

The flu and COVID have strikingly similar symptoms, including fever,

[runny nose](#), sore throat, cough, body aches, headaches and GI upset, Eltaki said. The only major symptom that definitely points toward COVID rather than flu is the loss of smell and taste.

"We ask that if you have any of those symptoms to call your physician, explain your symptoms and self-quarantine until you know exactly what you have," Eltaki said.

Public outreach regarding the importance of this year's flu shot is crucial. Doctors have seen a decline in immunizations, health screenings and other types of patient visits, because people are afraid they'll contract COVID-19 if they go to a doctor, Eltaki said.

Doctor's offices and clinics have put a number of infection-control measures in place to protect people, she said. These include pre-appointment screening questionnaires, universal masking of patients and staff, temperature screenings upon arrival, and strict disinfecting procedures between patients.

People still not reassured by these measures have other options, Eltaki added. Major grocery store and commercial pharmacy chains not only offer quick and easy flu shots, but some have been offering coupons or gift cards for people who get the shot during their shopping trip.

Some folks also might be reluctant to get the flu shot because of some of the myths that have cropped up around the inoculation, Eltaki noted.

The most common misperception is that you'll get the flu from the flu shot.

"The flu shot is made from a dead virus. You cannot get the flu from getting the flu shot," Eltaki said.

"However, you can experience some symptoms, which is the result of your body mounting an immune response," Eltaki continued. "You may have a low-grade fever or body aches, but that's not the flu, that's just your body matching the appropriate immune response to the flu shot."

There also is no evidence that a flu shot increases a person's risk of contracting COVID-19 or any other respiratory virus, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Flu shots are needed every year because influenza [virus](#) mutates so quickly that humans cannot mount a lasting preventive immunity against it.

Each year, doctors make their best prediction regarding the strains of flu most likely to circulate widely in humans. The annual flu vaccine protects against either three or four of the leading contenders, depending on which vaccine you get.

"Studies have shown that the influenza vaccine is about 60% effective in preventing the flu," Eltaki said. "Even though those odds are fair, we know if you do get the flu and you have received the flu shot, the severity, length, intensity and duration of your symptoms will still be less than the person who has not received a flu shot and gets the flu. There is some protective effect."

You should get the flu shot rather than the nasal spray vaccine, Eltaki added.

"More and more, health care practitioners are steering away from the nasal mist because of presumed better efficacy of the shot," she said. "Any child above the age of 6 months should get a flu shot."

Pregnant women, the elderly and the immune-compromised also would

do better with a flu shot than the nasal spray, Eltaki said.

**More information:** The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [flu vaccine misconceptions](#).

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