

Ask the Pediatrician: Why should children get the flu vaccine?

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Q: Is the flu vaccine really necessary for healthy kids?

A: Flu—short for influenza—is an illness caused by a [respiratory virus](#).

The flu can spread rapidly through communities, as the virus is passed from person to person.

When someone with the flu coughs or sneezes, the [influenza virus](#) gets into the air, and any people who are nearby, including children, can inhale it through the nose or mouth. The virus also can be spread when people touch a contaminated hard surface, such as a door handle, and then put their hands or fingers in their nose or mouth or rub their eyes.

The [flu season](#) usually starts in the fall and can last until the end of spring. Ideally, children should get an annual flu vaccine as soon as it is available, and no later than the end of October. But if your child did not get vaccinated yet, they still should at the earliest opportunity. Children younger than 9 years of age who are being immunized for the first time, or who only had a single flu vaccine before July 1, 2022, will need two doses of the vaccine given four weeks apart.

When there is an outbreak or epidemic, usually during the winter months, the illness tends to be most frequent in preschool or [school-age children](#). Flu viruses are known to spread quickly among college students and teens, too.

In the first few days of illness, the virus is easily transmitted to other children, parents and caregivers.

It is important for anyone 6 months and older to get the flu vaccine each year. Everyone 6 months and older should also get COVID-19 vaccines and booster doses when they are eligible. The COVID vaccine and flu vaccine can safely be given at the same time or at any time, one after the other.

Flu symptoms include:

- A sudden fever (usually above 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius)
- Chills
- Headache, body aches, and being a lot more tired than usual
- Sore throat
- Dry, hacking cough
- Stuffy, [runny nose](#)
- Some children may throw up (vomit) and have loose stools (diarrhea)

After the first few days of these symptoms, a [sore throat](#), stuffy nose and continuing cough become most evident. The flu can last a week or even longer. A child with a common cold usually has only a low-grade fever, a runny nose and only a small amount of coughing. Children with the flu—or adults, for that matter—usually feel much sicker, achier and more miserable than those with just a cold.

Everyone needs the flu vaccine each year to update their protection and reduce the risk of serious complications. It is the best way to prevent getting the flu. Safe and effective vaccines are made each year.

Both the inactivated (killed) vaccine, also called the flu shot, which is given by injection in the muscle, and the live-attenuated nasal spray vaccine can be used for influenza vaccination this season. There is no preference for a product or formulation, and any vaccine appropriate for age and health status can be used.

The vaccine teaches your body's immune system to protect you from the virus. This takes about two weeks after getting vaccinated. Getting vaccinated before the flu starts spreading will keep your family healthy so they can continue to enjoy the activities that help them thrive.

The flu vaccine is the best way to help prevent seasonal flu and its

serious complications, including hospitalization and death. By getting a [flu vaccine](#) and COVID-19 vaccine, children and teens can also help prevent viruses from spreading to others who are most at risk of getting very sick and being hospitalized, including grandparents and/or those who have chronic medical conditions.

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