

News Wire

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The Twindemic: Why Is the Flu Vaccine More Important This Season

TTUHSC Experts Available to Discuss Flu and Flu Vaccine

Twindemic refers to the dual threat of a severe influenza (flu) outbreak coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall and winter of 2020. Flu and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses but are caused by different viruses. Health experts say because some of the flu and COVID-19 symptoms are so similar, it may be hard to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. Health care professionals urge everyone to get a flu vaccine.

Flu Vaccine Myths and Effectiveness

Steven L. Berk, M.D., a geriatric infectious disease physician and dean of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) School of Medicine

“You can call it a ‘twindemic’ or just a perfect storm. As the pandemic continues, the usual flu season is approaching and will likely add its 20,000 or so deaths and ten times as many hospitalizations to whatever the continued COVID-19 toll will be. If you choose not to get the flu vaccine and do get influenza, you will surely worry about whether you have the flu, COVID-19 or both, at least until it gets all sorted out.”

- Because the flu vaccine is administered about the time many upper respiratory diseases are prevalent, one is likely to believe they got the flu from the flu vaccine, but that’s not what happens. The flu vaccine is an inactivated piece of the virus and there is no logical explanation for it causing a new infection.
- Some will have read that the vaccine is not totally effective. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recent studies show that flu vaccination reduces the risk of flu illness up to 60% among the overall population during seasons when most circulating flu viruses are well-matched to the flu vaccine.

“We would actually be happy if just everyone over the age of 65, everyone who has lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, immune and inflammatory disorders would get the influenza vaccine. These are the people who will fall under the 20,000 deaths. There is even a vaccine given at a higher dose to help guarantee that the elderly will respond with adequate antibodies providing protection that may be as high as 70%.”

Pregnant Women and Flu Vaccines

Edward Yeomans, M.D., chair of the TTUHSC Department of Ob/Gyn

“The seasonal influenza vaccine is recommended for all adults, but pregnant women are a particularly vulnerable group. They're subject to a higher incidence of pneumonia, hospitalization, intensive care, unit admission, and even adverse consequences for mom and baby.”

Yeomans said the flu vaccine is not harmful; it's actually helpful to the baby. There are no adverse anomalies recognized with the vaccine. No matter what trimester of pregnancy the expectant mother receives the vaccine and it's protective for the infant.

“In the first six months of life, the influenza vaccine is not effective. So, the only way to protect the infant is for the mother to be vaccinated.”

Should Children Get the Flu Vaccine and When?

Tammy Camp, M.D., pediatrician in the TTUHSC Department of Pediatrics and president of the Texas Pediatric Society

“Ideally, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children should have their flu vaccine by the end of October. We want to vaccinate ideally by the end of October. But even if we don't meet that deadline, we want to vaccinate all the way up through the flu season, because any kind of vaccination can provide protection within about two weeks of receiving that vaccination.”

- Children don't get the flu from the flu vaccine. The injectable vaccine is a killed vaccine making it impossible for a child to get the flu from the vaccine. Some kids will have some mild symptoms like a low-grade fever or some soreness and pain at the injection site.
- There are two options for the flu vaccine. The injectable vaccine and the live attenuated vaccine, which is a spray mist vaccine. Not every child is eligible for that vaccine, but it's certainly something that a parent could ask for if their child were not wanting to have an injectable vaccine or a shot.
- Children should begin flu vaccines at six months of age. Camp said the first time a child gets the flu vaccine, they require two vaccines – the first dose and then one month later, we give a second dose to provide them adequate protection.
- Children who are at risk with asthma or other respiratory underlying respiratory diseases, cystic fibrosis, any kind of other underlying medical problems or children with obesity are at increased risk for complications from influenza.

“Many children get very ill from the flu. Every year there are children who end up being hospitalized with the flu. And we know that there are pediatric deaths that occur each year from influenza. It is really critical that we do vaccinate our children so that we can decrease those numbers of children that become very ill.”