

Correcting Myths About the Flu Vaccine

Everyone has probably heard someone say “I got the flu from the flu shot.” These stories and many others like it are *completely inaccurate* and do a disservice to people who believe them. Here we hope to set the record straight about the influenza vaccine.

#1 *You can get the flu from the flu shot.* FALSE The vaccine is produced from inactivated organisms. This means that transmission of the disease through the vaccination process is impossible. Sometimes, people will feel soreness at the injection site or, rarely, run a low-grade fever and have very mild body aches the day after receiving the shot, but this is NOT the flu. Also, since the flu vaccine takes 4 to 6 weeks to become fully effective in the body, it is not uncommon for people to become infected before the flu shot takes effect and becomes protective.

#2 *The flu vaccine is 100% effective at preventing influenza.* FALSE The flu shot provides immunity against the three strains of the influenza virus that the C.D.C. (Centers for Disease Control) predicts will cause the most illness each year. On average, the flu shot is considered to be 70 to 90 percent effective, depending on two important factors: the virus involved and the strength of your immune system.

#3 *The flu is not very serious or deadly.* FALSE Much more than “just a bad cold”, coming down with influenza usually means several days of high fever, severe aches and pains, extreme fatigue, and other unpleasant symptoms. For approximately 20,000 Americans every year having the flu is fatal.

#4 *It’s too late to get vaccinated...* FALSE The American influenza season runs from November to April, with a peak in reported cases from December to March. Since the vaccine takes time to build sufficient flu-fighting antibodies, the best time to be immunized against the flu is October and November, but December or January is better than not at all. Protection from the flu shot typically lasts around six months but maybe longer.

#5 *If I’ve had the flu already, I don’t need the shot.* FALSE The strains of influenza virus that are prominent in causing illness change from year to year; this is why the vaccines change from year to year as well. The virus that caused last year’s outbreak(s) are probably different from the ones expected this year, so getting re-immunized every year is important.

#6 *There’s nothing you can do if you think you have the flu.* FALSE There are several approved medications that are effective at preventing the flu if you have been exposed to influenza and you start taking it soon enough. They can also reduce the severity and duration of symptoms once you are infected. The key to relief is starting on the medication early.

Don’t buy into rumors that you sometimes hear from the uninformed. Toads *can’t* give you warts, and the moon is *not* made of cheese.