

THE IMPORTANCE OF PREVENTING INFLUENZA DURING A PANDEMIC

As the world faces coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), it is more important than ever that older adults get vaccinated against influenza (flu).

UNDERSTANDING COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON OLDER ADULTS

In 2019, a new coronavirus, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), emerged that had not previously been seen in humans. In February 2020, the World Health Organization announced an official name for the novel disease caused by infection with SARS-CoV-2: coronavirus disease 2019, often abbreviated as COVID-19.¹

Though everyone is at risk for getting COVID-19 if they are exposed to the virus, this risk increases with age, as does the potential for severe illness, including hospitalization, intensive care, the use of a ventilator to facilitate breathing, and death.²



Current studies show that **8** out of **10** COVID-19-related deaths in the United States have been among adults age 65 years and older.²

Preliminary studies also suggest coinfection with influenza B and COVID-19 disease can elevate risk of death and increase the chance of a poorer prognosis.³

FLU VACCINATION AMIDST COVID-19 FOR ADULTS AGE 65 AND OLDER

As new information about the disease and how it relates to other viruses emerges each day, your patients may have questions about flu and flu vaccination as it relates to COVID-19. Following are a series of questions your older adult patients may ask, with suggested evidence-based responses to help guide your discussion with them on the increased importance of flu vaccination during this time.

How do I know if I have the flu, or if it's COVID-19?

Flu and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses that share many characteristics, but they are caused by different viruses. Because some of the symptoms are similar, it can be hard to tell the difference between the two diseases, but there are some clues that can aid the differential diagnosis. For example, COVID-19 may include a change in or loss of taste or smell, and, after someone has been exposed, COVID-19 symptoms typically take several days longer to appear than those related to flu. Testing will likely be needed to confirm a disease diagnosis.⁴

Which is more serious – flu or COVID-19?

Though there is still more to learn about COVID-19, what we do know is that both COVID-19 and flu are typically more severe in older adults as compared to younger adults, and can be life-threatening.⁶ Additionally, people over the age of 65 tend to have several of the high-risk conditions, such as heart disease and chronic respiratory illness, that increase the severity of both flu and COVID-19. Both illnesses can lead to hospitalization, admission to an intensive care unit, intubation with mechanical ventilation, or death.^{5,6}



SHOULD I GET A FLU SHOT DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Absolutely! In fact, it is HIGHLY recommended. Flu vaccination is important not only to help decrease your risk of severe illness and hospitalization if you do contract flu, but also to protect those around you. This also helps minimize medical visits and care that further strain the healthcare system, especially during the pandemic.⁶

EVIDENCE-BASED RESOURCES

From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Similarities and Differences Between Flu and COVID-19](#)
- [Guidance for Planning Vaccination Clinics Held at Satellite, Temporary, or Off-Site Locations](#)
- [Vaccination Guidance During a Pandemic](#)
- [Vaccination Recommendations During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

From the Immunization Action Coalition

- [Ask the Experts: COVID-19 and Routine Vaccination](#)
- [Clinic Tools: Vaccination and COVID-19](#)
- [Repository of Resources for Maintaining Immunization During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Can I have the flu and COVID-19 at the same time?

Yes. Because these illnesses are caused by two different viruses, it is possible to contract flu and COVID-19 at the same time.⁶

Is it safe for me to get a flu shot during the pandemic?

Yes! Not only is it safe to get a flu shot during the pandemic, it also is HIGHLY recommended. Getting your flu shot this year will be more important than ever, not only to reduce your risk from flu, but also to help conserve potentially scarce healthcare resources. When getting your flu shot, remember to practice everyday preventive actions such as wearing a mask to your appointment. Your healthcare provider or pharmacist will also be following CDC's vaccination pandemic guidance to prevent the spread of COVID-19.⁶

If I think I have, or have been confirmed to have, COVID-19, should I get a flu shot?

No. To prevent the possibility of spreading COVID-19 to other people, you should postpone getting a flu shot until you have met the criteria to stop your isolation.⁶

If I get a flu shot, will I be protected against COVID-19?

No. Because they are two different viruses, getting a flu shot will not protect you against COVID-19. However, flu vaccines have been shown to reduce the risk of flu-related illness and hospitalization.⁶



1. Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Technical Guidance. Naming the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and the Virus That Causes It. World Health Organization. [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it). Accessed September 2020.

2. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). People at Increased Risk. Older Adults. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>. Accessed September 2020.

3. The Epidemiology and Clinical Characteristics of Co-Infection of SARS-CoV-2 and Influenza Viruses in Patients During COVID-19 outbreak. Journal of Medical Virology. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/jmv.26163>. Accessed September 2020.

4. Similarities and Differences between Flu and COVID-19. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm>. Accessed September 2020.

5. Epidemiology of Individuals at Increased Risk of COVID-19 Disease. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/acip/meetings/downloads/slides-2020-08/COVID-05-McLung.pdf>. Accessed September 2020.

6. Seasonal Influenza (Flu). This Flu Season. Frequently Asked Influenza (Flu) Questions: 2020-2021 Season. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/season/faq-flu-season-2020-2021.htm>. Accessed September 2020.