

Why flu vaccination is more important this year than ever

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Public health officials are warning that it could be a different flu season than what the U.S. experienced the past two years, so protecting yourself and your family is more important than ever.

What is the flu?

What many people call the flu is actually viral gastroenteritis, or stomach flu, which is characterized by diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal cramps and pain. Influenza is the true flu. It's a viral [infection](#) that attacks your respiratory system, including your nose, throat and lungs.

At first, flu may seem like a common cold, with a [runny nose](#), sneezing and sore throat. But while colds usually develop slowly, flu tends to come on suddenly. And although a cold can be a bother, you usually feel much worse with flu.

For most people, flu resolves on its own. But sometimes flu and its complications can be deadly. People at higher risk of developing flu complications include [young children](#), [pregnant women](#) and those two weeks postpartum, those over 65, those with weakened immune systems and some chronic illnesses, and those who are obese.

Usually, you'll need nothing more than rest and plenty of fluids to treat flu. But if you have a severe infection or are at higher risk of complications, your health care professional may prescribe an antiviral drug to treat the flu.

How to keep your family healthy

Unlike the common cold and stomach flu, there is a vaccine for flu. While it's not 100% effective, getting vaccinated for flu can reduce your risk of becoming infected with flu, and lessen its severity and lower your risk of hospitalization if you are infected.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Mayo Clinic recommend a yearly flu vaccination for everyone 6 months and older, with rare exceptions. Vaccination is your [best defense](#) against flu. If you

haven't gotten your flu shot yet, now's the time.

In addition to vaccination, it's also important to take several measures to reduce the spread of infection, including:

- Wash your hands. Washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is an effective way to prevent many common infections. Or use alcohol-based hand sanitizers if soap and water aren't available.
- Avoid touching your face. Specifically, avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth to prevent spreading viruses.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes. Cough or sneeze into a tissue or your elbow. Then wash your hands.
- Clean surfaces. Regularly clean often-touched surfaces to prevent spread of infection from touching a surface with the virus on it and then your face.
- Avoid crowds. The flu spreads easily wherever people gather—in child care centers, schools, [office buildings](#), auditoriums and public transportation. By avoiding crowds during peak flu season, you reduce your chances of infection.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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