

Flu and Pneumonia Vaccination Myths

There are many common misconceptions about flu and pneumonia vaccinations, oftentimes deterring people from obtaining a vaccine that could protect them. Whether in a community housing environment or one's own home, it remains equally important for those over age 50 to receive vaccinations to help prevent illness.

Below is some information to help dispel the myths often associated with the flu and pneumonia vaccines.

MYTH: I am afraid that I will get the flu from the influenza vaccine.

It is not possible to get influenza from the flu shot. The vaccine is made from a killed virus which is not capable of causing the disease. *NOTE: the nasal spray vaccine is a live but weakened virus and is not recommended for adults over 50.

MYTH: I took the flu vaccine one year and I got the flu anyway! I don't think the flu vaccine works.

The flu vaccine is not 100% effective in preventing flu. It is possible for some people to still get influenza after taking the flu shot. These people usually get a milder case of the flu than they otherwise would get. The risk of hospitalization and death from complications of influenza is also greatly reduced.

Protection from influenza vaccine usually begins within two weeks of receiving the vaccine. Therefore, it is possible to get influenza before the vaccine has had time to achieve its maximum effect.

The flu vaccine protects against influenza. Sometimes, people use the term "flu" in a general way to refer to a wide range of diseases. For example, someone may say that they had a case of "stomach flu" recently. Respiratory infections and colds are sometimes confused with influenza as well. The influenza vaccine protects only against a specific disease caused by the influenza virus. It does not protect against colds, other respiratory infections, or similar conditions. However, by reducing the incidence and severity of influenza, the flu vaccine can reduce complications of influenza, which might include respiratory infections.

Typical influenza illness includes abrupt onset of

- high fever
- muscle and joint pain
- a dry cough
- headache
- runny nose
- sore throat
- chills

Unlike other common respiratory infections, influenza can cause extreme fatigue lasting several days to weeks.

MYTH: A friend of mine took the pneumonia shot and she got pneumonia anyway. I don't think the pneumonia vaccine really works.

The pneumonia vaccine is not 100% effective in preventing pneumonia due to all causes. The pneumonia vaccine actually protects against infections caused by a bacterium called *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. The vaccine has been proven effective against blood-borne infections of *S. pneumoniae* which occur frequently among persons 65 years and older. Pneumonia due to other infections, or due to aspiration, cannot be prevented with the so-called "pneumonia vaccine." However, the vaccine is about 50% effective in preventing complications of pneumococcal pneumonia (such as blood and brain infections) and death.

* Information provided by the 100% Immunization Campaign, a group of organizations that share an interest in promoting immunization practices in older adults and long-term care settings. www.immunizeseniors.org

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