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Don't Fall for Misconceptions about the Flu Vaccine: Get the Facts... then Get Vaccinated!

It's that time again—time to drag out the fall clothing and put away the beach bag. It's also time to get your flu vaccine. Flu season can begin as early as October and last as late as May.

That means you should try to get your flu vaccine in October or November, but if you miss that window of time, it's not too late to get vaccinated in December or even January. It takes the body about two weeks to develop antibodies that protect against flu after you have been vaccinated; then you are protected for up to a year. "Last year's flu vaccine won't protect you from this year's flu," explains Extension Health Associate, Janet Pollard, "because influenza is constantly changing into new and different strains for which the vaccine is designed each year."

"One of the biggest misconceptions, and probably one of the biggest deterrents to getting the vaccine, is the misconception that you can get the flu from the flu shot," says Pollard. "The flu shot is an 'inactivated' virus, which means it is a killed virus. It is not a live virus being injected into the body. For this reason, you cannot acquire flu from the shot. If you acquire flu-like symptoms after receiving the flu shot, they are most likely the result of another virus—not influenza."

A newer vaccine option administered as a nasal spray, rather than a shot, is also available. If you choose to get the nasal spray vaccine, you could have some flu-like symptoms afterward, which typically resolve on their own in one or two days. This newer vaccine, called the live attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV), was licensed for administration in 2003 and is made from weakened ("attenuated") virus. LAIV does not cause influenza, but it can cause mild symptoms. For this reason, the flu shot, rather than LAIV, is the preferred vaccine for people (including health-care workers and family members) coming in close contact with anyone who has a severely weakened immune system (that is, anyone who requires care in a protected environment).

"Ask your doctor which vaccine is right for you," says Pollard. "If you are moderately to severely ill, allergic to eggs, have a history of Guillain-Barre Syndrome, or have ever had a severe allergic reaction to a vaccine, it is very important to see your doctor before being vaccinated," she says.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Immunization Program, the flu shot can typically be given to people 6 months of age and older who want to reduce their risk of contracting influenza. It is recommended for people who are at high risk of developing serious illness and complications due to the influenza virus.

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LAIIV is typically recommended for healthy children and adults from ages 5–49 years, including most health-care workers and household contacts of most people at high risk for influenza complications, but not for people coming in close contact with anyone who has a severely weakened immune system.

Talk to your health care professional if you still have questions about the flu vaccine, and don't fall for common misconceptions about the vaccine. Be prepared for the upcoming flu season!

Source: Janet M. Pollard, M.P.H., Extension Associate – Health, Texas Cooperative Extension. October 2005. (Texas Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences website: <http://fcs.tamu.edu>)

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