

The Importance of Influenza Vaccination

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Although it is March, it is not too late to get the influenza vaccine (the flu shot) for this year. The 2017-2018 flu season has been particularly difficult, with more than twenty-three thousand hospitalizations, and unfortunately numerous deaths from complications of influenza ^{1,2}. We have all seen the news reports of overcrowded emergency rooms filled with ill patients seeking care. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) predicted this flu season would peak between December and February, but there is still a substantial amount of influenza virus circulating in various communities throughout the U.S., meaning it is not too late to protect yourself. Here we discuss important reasons to get the influenza vaccine, and we hope to dispel some of the common barriers to vaccination.

The flu shot is among the most important vaccines we can take to protect our health, especially for those living with a chronic illness like Erdheim-Chester Disease (ECD). For most, the flu results in a mild to moderate illness, but for some the flu can be severe, leading to high fevers, shaking chills, dehydration, and severe fatigue and body aches. The illness puts extra stress on various organs such as the heart and lungs, which must work harder to maintain normal bodily functions. The extra workload is particularly dangerous for people who already have heart or lung disease, because the diseased organs may not be able to keep up with the increased demands placed upon them during the illness. The fever and general ill feeling that come with the flu can lead to dehydration, thus stressing the kidneys to maintain fluid balance. Again, this can be dangerous for those whose kidney function is already compromised. These complications can lead to organ failure, which can be life-threatening. Lastly, some people may develop a secondary bacterial infection, such as bacterial pneumonia, after getting the flu, and this can also be life threatening³. Because ECD can lead to organ dysfunction, getting the flu is a potentially dangerous infection for our patients, and we strongly recommend yearly vaccination.

Patients may perceive barriers to vaccination and therefore miss the opportunity to receive this important protection. Some patients do not get vaccinated because they hear reports that the vaccine is not 100 % effective in preventing the flu, and so why bother, since it is not fully effective? While it is true that every year the influenza vaccine varies in its effectiveness, being vaccinated can help to reduce the severity of the flu, which is no small benefit ⁴. Another perceived barrier is the concern over the cost and availability of the vaccine. These concerns should not be a barrier, because most insurance companies, and Medicare, help cover the cost of the vaccine, although some patients may have to cover the cost of a co-payment. Furthermore, most primary care providers and many local pharmacies offer the vaccine, making it widely available for almost everyone. Lastly, some patients raise concerns about side effects. The side effects of the vaccine are typically mild, with injection site soreness, a low-grade fever, body aches, and headache, being the most common. These side effects can be easily managed by taking acetaminophen, rest, and drinking extra water⁵.

The flu vaccine is an important way to protect yourself and it is not too late to be vaccinated! Please call your health care provider to make an appointment, or contact your local pharmacy to find out when you

can be immunized. The CDC offers a wealth of information about the influenza vaccine and can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/index.htm>

References

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[The Washington Post](#)
3. https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/high_risk.htm
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/spotlights/vaccine-reduces-severe-outcomes.htm>
5. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/vaccine/general.htm>