

Newsflash!

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Take your flu vaccine today at the SMU/DGMAH Vaccination site



This year's flu season is expected to be more severe compared to the last two years. The South African Vaccination and Immunisation Centre (SAVIC) at SMU answers your questions and calls on everybody to protect themselves from severe influenza by getting a flu shot.

Why are we likely to experience a more severe flu season compared to the previous two years?

Very little influenza was circulating during the previous two years, compared to pre-COVID-19 seasons. This is because the measures for limiting the spread of SARS-CoV-2, such as wearing of face masks, regular hand sanitising and social distancing, also limited the spread of other respiratory viruses, including influenza. Also, overseas travel was limited during the first two years of the pandemic, hence there was much less intercontinental influenza virus transmission compared to previous years.

What is the best way to protect myself from contracting flu?

The best defence against flu is to get vaccinated. Flu spreads easily from person-to-person through respiratory droplets and aerosols, especially when people are coughing and sneezing. In addition to getting vaccinated, to prevent transmitting flu one must avoid close contact with sick people, stay home when you are sick, cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, wear your mask, clean hands regularly and avoid touching your mouth, eyes, and nose, and clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.

Why is it beneficial to get your flu shot?

Although flu is mostly mild, it can result in serious illness, hospitalisation and death. An average of 11,000 South Africans died annually from flu-related illness in pre-COVID-19 years.

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What is in a flu shot?

The influenza vaccine does not contain any live viruses. It contains two inactivated influenza A and two influenza B strains (types), as recommended by the World Health Organization. It is predicted that influenza B will be the predominant strain circulating this year.

How often should you get a flu shot?

You should get the flu vaccine annually, as influenza viruses mutate (change) rapidly every season. The flu vaccine is therefore adapted every year to ensure that it will provide protection against the predominant influenza strains predicted to be circulating each year.

Who should get the flu shot?

Ideally everybody 6 months and older, should receive the annual flu vaccine for the benefit of herd immunity. Individuals who are at higher risk of serious influenza complications due to weakened immune responses, should be prioritised for vaccination. These include elderly people; pregnant women; young children; those with cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease, HIV infection, immunocompromising conditions, or underlying medical conditions; those on long-term aspirin treatment; those who are morbidly obese; and residents at institutions. Family contacts and healthcare workers should also be prioritised, since they are at high risk of transmitting influenza to individuals at high risk of severe influenza.

When should I get the flu shot and will I be protected immediately?

The best time to go and get your flu vaccine is right now, because it takes approximately two weeks for the body to develop a protective antibody response. Hence, you should get vaccinated before the start of the influenza season, ideally from March to April. However, it is never too late to **#vaccinate!**

Previously, influenza viruses circulated mainly during the winter months in South Africa. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, and specifically towards the end of 2021, South Africa saw an unusual increase in influenza cases during summer. This may be explained by the relaxation of COVID-19 non-pharmaceutical prevention measures, and the 'immunity gap' resulting from influenza not circulating during 2020 and 2021, because of these very same measures.

Is the flu shot safe for everyone?

The flu vaccine can be given to anyone from the age of six months, except if you have a history of severe allergy to the vaccine or any component of the vaccine. Everybody else is eligible to get the flu vaccine. So, if you have an opportunity to get the flu vaccine, go and get one as soon as possible.

Is it safe to get the flu vaccine when you are pregnant?

Yes, it is safe for pregnant women, and can be life saving for small children as it significantly reduces their risk of dying from influenza. Because the flu vaccine is not recommended for infants younger than 6 months, pregnant women can protect their babies through vaccination during pregnancy. Unvaccinated mothers of newborns can still protect them by getting vaccinated as soon after delivery as possible.

Can I get the flu shot when I am not feeling well?

Individuals with minor illnesses without fever may be vaccinated. Vaccination must however be postponed in the case of fever, or moderate/severe acute illness, with or without fever.

Can the flu vaccine give me flu?

No, it cannot give you flu, because the vaccine is inactivated. If you do present with flu shortly after receiving the vaccine, it means that either you had already been incubating flu at the time you got the flu shot, or you got the flu shortly after being vaccinated, before you had time to mount an immune response. Also, many people mistake the common cold for flu. The common cold and other respiratory viruses circulating at the same time as influenza viruses, cannot be prevented by the flu vaccine.

Can I expect side effects after getting a flu shot?

Yes, and these are mostly mild, occur within the first 3 days when your body is mounting its initial immune response, and resolve spontaneously without treatment, within 1-3 days. The most common side effects (occurring in more than 1 in every 10 people) are headache, muscular pain (myalgia), malaise, pain at the injection site and fatigue. Less common side effects (occurring in 1-10 in 100 people) are reactions at the injection site (swelling, hardness, redness, bruising), shivering, fever and sweating.

I had the COVID-19 vaccine, do I need a flu shot?

Yes, because the COVID-19 vaccine targets SARS-CoV-2, so it is not going to protect you against influenza viruses. During a pandemic such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, there is a high possibility of co-circulation of viruses. Vaccination against influenza is therefore particularly important to prevent co-infection and severe influenza. It is also important to reduce symptoms that could be confused with those of COVID-19 and to minimise stress on the healthcare system. Although the influenza vaccine does not protect against COVID-19, there is evidence that influenza vaccination lowers COVID-19 hospitalisation and deaths in individuals who are co-infected with both SARS-CoV-2 and influenza.

What is the difference between flu and COVID-19 symptoms?

That is the challenge! It is difficult to differentiate between the symptoms of flu and COVID-19. Symptoms of flu and COVID-19 are very much similar, for example fever, chills, headache, body aches, tiredness and sore throat. The only way you will be sure that it is not COVID-19, is by getting a COVID-19 test.

Is it safe to get the flu vaccine at the same time as the COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes, you no longer need to wait for 14 days between vaccinations. Both COVID-19 vaccines and the flu vaccines are available at SMU and they are equally important to get.

