

A Shot in the Arm Can Avoid a 'Twindemic'

Unless you work in health care or work in such places as nursing homes or day care centers, no one will tell you that you have to get a flu shot. And unlike wearing a mask, no one will know if you got a flu shot or not. This one is your call.

Infectious disease physicians and public health authorities know that when it comes to getting the annual flu shot not everyone can be convinced. There is a well-established lack of trust about vaccines. The COVID-19 vaccine publicity has made matters worse as some suspect a vaccine might become available before it is proven safe. In fact, there is misinformation on social media about vaccines in general.

Because the flu vaccine is given around the time many upper respiratory diseases are prevalent, one is likely to believe they got the flu from the flu vaccine, but that's not what happens. The flu vaccine is an inactivated piece of the virus and there is no logical explanation for it causing a new infection. Many people also think they are allergic to eggs. Few actually are, but if really necessary, you can get a flu vaccine not grown on eggs.

Some will have read that the vaccine is not totally effective. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recent studies show that flu vaccination reduces the risk of flu illness by 40% to 60% among the overall population during seasons when most circulating flu viruses are well-matched to the flu vaccine.

This is true – but 40% to 60% effective is better than nothing at all. The vaccine has been carefully formulated to include the virus strains that we know are headed this way, making it maximally effective. If you do get influenza despite the vaccine, chances are it will be mild.

Not convenient? Don't have the time? Never have there been more places to get the influenza vaccine. (vaccinefinder.org) At all these sites, you will be safe from COVID-19 with masks and distancing.

Every year, physicians coax all comers to get a flu vaccine. But 2020 is not an average year and gentle coaxing is not in the spirit of what we know is just around the corner. You can call it a 'twindemic' or just a perfect storm. As the pandemic continues, the usual flu season is approaching and will likely add its 20,000 or so deaths and ten times as many hospitalizations to whatever the continued COVID-19 toll will be. Hospital intensive care units will become even more crowded and perhaps filled to capacity. If you choose not to get the flu vaccine and do get influenza you will surely worry about whether you have the flu, COVID-19 or both, at least until it gets all sorted out.

If you are healthy and have no underlying diseases, the flu likely won't be fatal. But, as with the COVID-19 warning, you can pass influenza to someone who could die from it.

The CDC and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends everyone above the age of 6 months should get the vaccine. That is a recommendation that would keep children in school and everyone working instead of at home with flu symptoms. Here is a trade secret: We

would actually be happy if just everyone over the age of 65, everyone who has lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, immune and inflammatory disorders would get the influenza vaccine. These are the people who will fall under the 20,000 deaths. (There is even a vaccine given at a higher dose to help guarantee that the elderly will respond with adequate antibodies providing protection that may be as high as 70%.) Pregnant women also need to get the vaccine. It will protect mom and the baby as well.

If you're not convinced, speak with your doctor, your trusted pharmacist or someone who has lost a family member to influenza. If you are interested in history, read about the great pandemic of 1918.

Still not convinced? Then wear a mask, wash your hands and hope for the best.

Now, more than ever before, your flu shot is important – to you, your family and our country.

Steven L. Berk, M.D., is executive vice president of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, dean of the School of Medicine and an infectious disease physician.