

Classic Flu Myths

In the 1500s, Italians believed the illness called “influenza” was controlled by the *influence* of the moon and stars – thus its name. While that myth has long since died, other myths about flu persevere. Among them:

Flu vaccine can give you the flu.

Impossible. The three viruses used to create the flu vaccine are noninfectious – in other words, inactivated, or “dead.” Those individuals who are allergic to eggs, however, and those with acute illness accompanied by fever should avoid the vaccine.

One flu shot lasts several years.

Not so. Flu viruses have an astonishing ability to mutate. Thus, the vaccines that manufacturers produce each year are “customized” to the strain that will be prevalent. You should be vaccinated every year.

Flu symptoms are just like those of a cold.

While the two illnesses share some similarities, including congestion and sore throat, they are more different than alike, and are easily distinguishable. For example, flu may include eye and muscle aches and fever, which are not typical cold symptoms.

The flu is isolated to cold weather regions.

Wrong again. Flu can strike in almost any temperature and any geographic region. If you travel in the southern hemisphere April through September, for example, you should be vaccinated; in the tropics, it’s advisable to get a flu shot no matter when you go.

Antibiotics work against the flu.

No, they don’t. Antibiotics work only on bacteria-borne illness, not viral infections, such as influenza. The reverse is also true: Flu vaccines cannot protect you from illnesses like colds and bronchitis.

[see classic flu myths, continued on back cover]

Classic Flu Myths (continued)

It’s time for another “pandemic,” a world-wide outbreak, like the Hong Kong (1968) and Asian (1957) influenzas.

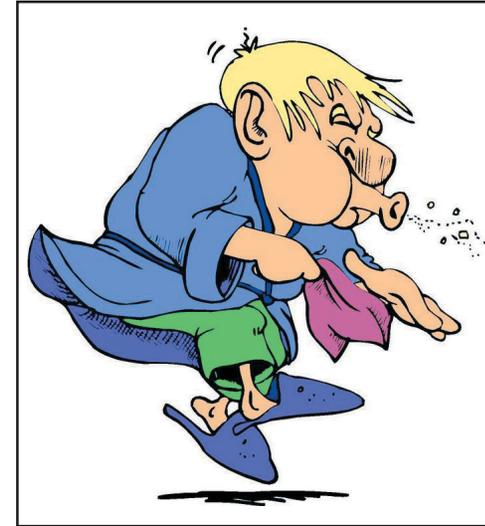
It’s virtually impossible to tell when and where such very large outbreaks of flu will take place. As one California medical officer put it, “Predicting the flu is about as reliable as predicting the weather.”

Pregnant or breastfeeding women should never get vaccinations.

Just the opposite. Research suggests that pregnancy may actually *increase* the risk for complications as a result of the flu. It’s not only perfectly safe, but critically important for breastfeeding women as well as women in their second or third trimester to be vaccinated.

Kids suffer the most from the flu.

While flu clearly wreaks havoc in schools, those most at risk from serious illness, even death, are seniors; they make up more than 80 percent of the 20,000-40,000 deaths caused by the flu each year.



Tips to Prevent and Fight the Flu

APIC offers these tips for guidance only. As always, you should consult your doctor for specific recommendations.

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Flu vs. Cold: Detecting the Difference

People often confuse the symptoms of the flu with those of a simple upper respiratory infection – the common cold – or the upset stomach popularly known as “stomach flu,” but, in fact, these are very different illnesses with very different characteristics.

The common cold is caused by the rhinovirus and coronavirus, which produce an infection of the upper respiratory tract but rarely in the bronchial tree.

The influenza virus, meanwhile, usually spreads to the lower respiratory tract (bronchia and lungs) and causes more serious disease, which can lead to hospitalization and even death, particularly among the aged and those suffering from another serious illness.

Typically, a common cold doesn't cause a fever, though one may be present. Colds are more often indicated by any of the following symptoms: runny nose, nasal congestion, sore throat, dry cough, hoarseness or difficulty swallowing, and swollen or tender glands in the neck.

On the other hand, fever – often up to 104 degrees Fahrenheit – is a standard feature of the flu (except for in the elderly, who may experience a low-grade fever, or no fever at all). It may be accompanied by chills, headaches, eye pain, muscle aches, malaise or loss of appetite, sore throat, dry cough, and profound weariness which, like fever, is another feature that cannot be found in the common cold.

The major difference between the flu and a common cold, however, is their individual potential: While a cold can be annoying, even debilitating, the flu has the capacity to kill, particularly among the aged; Of the 20,000-40,000 deaths caused by flu-related complications each year, more than 80 percent occur in seniors.

A Flu Fighter's Checklist

Steps You Can Take to Reduce Your Chances of Getting the Flu

1. Wash your hands frequently.

Hand contact is one of the principal ways the flu virus finds its way into your system. Wash hands vigorously for about 15 seconds, paying attention to the areas between the fingers and on the back of the hands. Use hot water and rinse in a steady stream. If you're in a public lavatory, dry your hands before you shut the water off, using the towel to turn the tap off. If there is a blow dryer, activate with your elbow.

2. An antiviral drug is an option for those who should not get an influenza vaccine.

Consult your doctor. Both amantadine and rimantadine have been shown to be safe and effective – about 70-80 percent – in reducing both the severity as well as the duration of influenza A, one of the three flu viruses. These prescription drugs can be taken as a preventive measure. They can also be taken as a remedy should flu symptoms appear; treatment must start within 48 hours of the first signs, however. Consult your physician before taking any medication.

3. Eat a balanced diet, get proper amounts of sleep and exercise regularly.

As Barbara Soule, President of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) says, “The first line of defense against the flu is a healthy body and rested mind.”

4. Educate your family and coworkers about the flu and its effects.

There's safety in numbers, so make sure those around you understand about the flu and its potential effects. The APIC Web site www.apic.org contains a host of information on this subject, including fact sheets, brochures and posters issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

5. Insure that at-risk family members and co-workers are vaccinated.

This includes the elderly, children with asthma, and individuals with chronic lung or liver disease, diabetes, heart or kidney ailments, or chronic anemia. Include also those undergoing treatment for cancer and those who have compromised immune systems.

6. Keep your distance.

If you must be in the same room with family members or co-workers infected with the flu, try to limit your time there to one hour maximum, and keep your distance – six feet minimum. If you need to get closer than that, be careful not to stand in the path of coughs and sneezes. Limit such close contacts to just a few minutes

