

# Is It Too Early to Get the Flu Vaccine?

If you want to get a flu shot, experts advise making an appointment in September. Getty Images

- The CDC says getting the flu vaccine in August isn't advised because it may not be as effective during the worst of the flu season.
- The body needs about 2 weeks after receiving the shot to create antibodies that can protect against influenza.
- Experts are advising people to get a flu shot so that they are at less risk of getting both COVID-19 and the flu this winter.

Pharmacies are stocking up on flu shots as they anticipate more people will get vaccinated this year. Although the vaccine is available now, it's not the best time to receive it.

Recent guidance

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from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says getting vaccinated in August is too early — especially for older folks — because it may reduce your protection later on during flu season.

Your body needs about 2 weeks

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after you receive the shot to create antibodies that can protect you from influenza.

The CDC says September and October are “good times to get vaccinated.” Shots should continue as long as the flu virus circulates, even if that’s during January or later.

One major change to this year’s vaccine is that the high-dose flu vaccine for people over the age of 65 will cover four strains

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this year instead of three.

## **‘Twindemic’ concerns**

Receiving a vaccine may be challenging this year, according to Lawrence O. Gostin, a professor and director of the O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law at Georgetown University in Washington D.C.

He’s also the director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law. His report in JAMA

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outlined strategies to increase vaccination this fall, citing the chance for dual epidemics.

Gostin fears more people won't be likely to get a flu shot this year.

"The usual places that we give flu vaccines are in schools, colleges, and the workplace," he explained. "Many of these venues will be entirely or partially closed, making it harder to get a flu shot."

Gostin also said more people may flood the health system this year when they have flu symptoms, as they may fear the illness could be COVID-19.

"The main fear, however, is that with all this disease from the two viruses, we will overwhelm the health system," he added.

Dr. Daniel H. Solomon, an associate physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, thinks the pandemic may force people to seek care for symptoms they would have ignored in the past.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, according to Solomon. Anyone with respiratory symptoms should get tested for COVID-19 even if the symptoms are mild.

“This will be important to stem outbreaks by identifying cases, tracing contacts, and ensuring appropriate quarantine,” he said.

“I don’t think that [new coronavirus] testing necessarily needs to (or should) happen at a doctor’s office,” Solomon said.

“Drive-through testing sites or home testing would be good alternatives so people can get tested without exposing other people in a healthcare setting.”

## **Flu vaccination during a pandemic**

We don’t know what to expect this flu season given the pandemic, making it especially important to get your influenza vaccine, said Stacey Schultz-Cherry, PhD, an infectious disease professor at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and deputy director of the WHO Collaborating Center for Studies on the Ecology of Influenza in Animals and Birds.

There is evidence

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that you can have influenza and COVID-19 at the same time, and those with coinfection have poorer outcomes. Other research

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found COVID-19 and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) can also coexist.

“It is unknown how commonly this [dual infection] could occur, how it would impact disease severity, and what groups would be most susceptible,” Schultz-Cherry said.

“We have seen the impact that a bad flu season has on our health care system. I can’t imagine the effect that co-circulation of both viruses would have on our system.”

Receiving a flu shot could make it easier to tell if you have COVID-19 in the event you get sick, as both illnesses have similar symptoms.

“Getting the vaccine would decrease the chances that any disease signs are from a flu infection,” she said.

Citing a decrease in flu cases

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in the Southern Hemisphere, Dr. Ingrid T. Katz, associate faculty director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, said she was hopeful for a mild flu season in the United States.

“The precautions we are taking as a society to prevent acquiring COVID-19 [physical distancing, hand-washing, mask usage] is exactly the same way to prevent flu,” Katz told [name removed].

## Flu shot supply and demand

Manufacturers have boosted flu shot production to meet the high demand for the season.

A record 175 million doses were distributed for the 2019–2020 season. That number will rise to between 194 million and 198 million doses for the upcoming season, the CDC

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reported.

Rite Aid raised vaccine doses by 40 percent. Walmart and Walgreens said they expect more demand this autumn, Reuters reported.

Walgreens anticipates demand to rise by 30 to 50 percent. CVS expects to dole out more than double the number of vaccines compared to other seasons, according to USA Today.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll found that 60 percent of U.S. adults plan to get a flu shot in the fall. During the 2018–2019 flu season, 45 percent

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of American adults got vaccinated.

## Flu shots in 2020

Getting a flu shot will look a little different this year. Walgreens and CVS will check people's temperatures and screen them prior to administering the vaccine. They will wear face shields while giving the vaccine.

People won't be vaccinated if they have a fever or other symptoms of illness, Walgreens noted.

Clinic visits may decline this fall because many people are using telemedicine, so health professionals need to be creative about ways for people to get vaccinated, Solomon said.

"This can look like drive-through vaccine sites [or] pop-up vaccine fairs in healthcare settings, schools, day cares, places of worship, and workplaces," Solomon said.

“My feeling is that there is ‘no wrong door’ to get a vaccine, and any efforts to make them easily accessible will increase uptake in a community.”