

Q&A: Infectious disease specialist discusses why it's more important than ever to get the flu shot

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All vaccines are designed to educate your immune system to respond quickly if it ever runs into an infection and the flu shot is no different, says Dr. Barrett.

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While the world awaits the development and approval of a vaccine that

will help in the global fight against COVID-19, medical experts are worried about how the impending flu season could exacerbate already strained health care systems around the world.

Public health officials and [medical experts](#) have stressed that it's more important than ever to get a flu shot, which is a vaccine specially designed each year to combat influenza. We asked Dr. Lisa Barrett, assistant professor in Dalhousie's Faculty of Medicine and infectious disease expert, to explain how the flu shot works and why medical experts are more concerned about the impacts of this year's influenza season than in years past.

What exactly are flu vaccines and how do they work?

All vaccines are designed to educate your [immune system](#) to respond quickly if it ever runs into an infection and the flu shot is no different. It is a way that we can educate our immune system against the ever-changing [influenza virus](#) from season to season—everybody should get one each season.

The influenza (or flu) vaccine, is an injection given in the arm, and it contains various different parts of the flu [virus](#) depending on which flu shot you get. The take-home message is that every flu shot or vaccine contains bits and pieces of flu virus from various different strains of virus. Each year, scientists get together and predict what the most frequent viruses are likely to be in the upcoming season. They combine these together into one vaccine, and that's how your immune system gets educated for the viruses that are likely to be circulating that season. You get one shot as soon as it comes out in the fall and then you develop some protection or immunity—your immune system is getting prepared to fight quickly against the flu virus strains that were in the vaccine.

Why are medical experts stressing that it is more important to get

the flu shot this year than in years past?

It is always important to get a flu shot. But this year we also have COVID-19, which is another respiratory virus whose main target is the lungs. Influenza or the flu virus, also targets the lungs and it is likely that if you get the two together, your chances of having permanent damage to your lungs or not surviving are much much higher. Therefore, because we have no vaccine for COVID-19 and we do have one to protect you from influenza, it's very important that people do what they can to keep themselves from getting influenza. There is going to be COVID-19 around, and you don't want them both. You don't want the double whammy. It will not go well.

If there are high levels of COVID-19 community spread in communities, what is the safest way for people to get their flu shot?

It's important to know that influenza and COVID-19 spread in similar ways, and therefore there can be community spread of influenza each year as well. So, the take home is that every skill we've learned about preventing spread of COVID-19, is also incredibly useful for preventing the spread of influenza. What I mean by that is, washing your hands, making sure that you don't touch your face, and wearing a mask when it is not possible to keep social distance, are the real key ways that you can prevent COVID-19 spread and safely go out to get your influenza shot.

Also, if you can have flexibility around when and where you go to get your shot, try to choose a time that is slightly less crowded, not middle of the day, off hours or evenings—that's a really great way to help spread out the number of people that are at the influenza vaccine station or pharmacy at any point in time. Planning outings, socialization, and even medical care to promote more social distancing is a key way we can get better at learning how to live with COVID-19. So, if you have some

flexibility, choose off times when there won't be as many people and then we can help spread people out over time.

What would you tell people who are hesitant to get their flu shot this year?

There are lots of reasons why people don't want to get a flu shot or feel it's not really that useful for them in particular. I would say that there is pretty close to zero reasons why one of the flu vaccines approved in Canada and available in Nova Scotia, can't be taken by anyone. And you know what, even if you don't think it's incredibly useful to you, you are helping to protect your community by getting a [flu vaccine](#). Even if you are someone who doesn't get too sick when infected with respiratory viruses like flu or COVID-19, you may have few symptoms and not know you are spreading to others who may not be so healthy. Getting a flu shot reduces the likelihood that you get infected and spread to others. So, a flu shot is an amazing and free way to contribute to your health and your community.

Also, it's important to recognize that there are almost no people above the age of six months in the world who can't safely take one of the flu shots that are available. People who feel they get sick after a [flu shot](#) are experiencing an immune ramp-up; that's their immune system responding to the vaccine and getting educated—it's not that you got the flu. You might not feel super great for a couple of days, but you're not getting the flu from these vaccines. Get the vaccine, it's safe and even if you don't think it's good for you in particular, it's good for your community (hey, I bet I already said that, but I want to say it again!!).

We are still waiting for the [influenza](#) vaccines to be available, and Nova Scotia has bought more than usual this year—that means we shouldn't run out. Some people say, I'm going to leave the shots for the people who really need them and that is actually NOT the way to think. As I said

before, people who may not have symptoms and aren't the sickest are also the people who are out and about the most and they transmit to others without knowing it. So, there will be lots of flu [vaccine](#) around, don't wait—take the shot!

Provided by Dalhousie University

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