

[Home](#) > [How to Stay Healthy This Flu Season](#)

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How to Stay Healthy This Flu Season [1]

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It started with a scratchy throat and a few errant sneezes, but by the end of last week it was apparent that full force of the cold and flu season had descended directly on my sinuses. And from the sniffing and coughing going on around me at ASCO HQ, it sounds like I'm not the only one.

So with all of the germs surrounding us this time of year, how can we make sure that we and those we care about stay healthy?

According to most doctors, the most important thing you can do is to **get a flu shot each year**. Getting a flu shot is especially important for people with cancer and cancer survivors, as well as their family members, friends, and caregivers. Cancer and cancer treatments weaken the immune system, making people with cancer and cancer survivors more likely to get sicker from the flu and develop complications, like pneumonia, that could put them in the hospital. (Sometimes, people with cancer should not be vaccinated against the flu, though, so talk with your doctor.)

Although it's best to get a flu shot before flu season begins, the vaccine is still beneficial if you receive it later in the season. After receiving the shot, it takes your body about two weeks to produce specialized cells called antibodies that will protect you from specific flu viruses.

Even if you already got a flu shot this year, there are still a number of other things you can do to reduce your chances of catching the flu. Because this disease usually spreads from person to person through droplets that travel through the air when a person infected with a flu virus coughs or sneezes, you should:

- Try not to touch your nose, mouth, or eyes after touching shared objects or shaking hands with someone.
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water. Using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer when you can't get to a sink is another great option.
- Clean the phone, computer keyboard, steering wheel, and any other items a sick person touches using soap, disinfectant, or rubbing alcohol before you use them. Flu viruses can live up to eight hours on the surface of objects.
- Ask people not to visit if they are sick or live with someone who has the flu. The flu can be spread very easily, and people who have been infected with flu viruses can spread them even before they have a fever, cough, sore throat, stuffy or runny nose, body aches, chills, or other symptoms.
- Don't get near people who are sick or look/sound ill. If you have been near someone who has the flu and you have cancer or are a cancer survivor, talk with your doctor. Your doctor may recommend taking an antiviral drug, which can help keep flu viruses from making you sick.
- If you are sick and need to be around someone who has cancer, cough and sneeze into a tissue or into your sleeve to keep from spreading your germs.

For more flu facts for people with cancer, listen to this Cancer.Net podcast.

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[healthy living](#) [5]

[flu](#) [6]

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[1] <http://www.cancer.net/blog/2014-01/how-stay-healthy-flu-season>

[2] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/flu_facts.mp3

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/tags/winter>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/tags/tips>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/tags/healthy-living>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/tags/flu>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/how-cancer-treated/when-call-doctor-during-cancer-treatment>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/infection>