ASCO® AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CLINICAL ONCOLOGY
KNOWLEDGE CONQUERS CANCER

Getting a Flu Shot When You Have Cancer

Do I need a flu vaccine (shot) when I have cancer?

Yes. The flu shot is recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for nearly everyone, including most people with cancer. Talk with your doctor about when to get it, so you can get the best protection during and after your cancer treatment.

The flu shot helps your body develop antibodies against the types of influenza virus, or flu, that are likely to be most common each year. This is especially important when you have cancer, because cancer and treatment can weaken your immune system. This means you are more likely to get sick or develop flu-related conditions, and these can be serious.

Each year, experts develop a new flu vaccine based on the types of influenza virus most likely to cause illness. The vaccine protects you against 4 types of virus.

Getting a flu vaccine helps even if you do get the flu. You are less likely to become very sick or develop a serious condition. These serious conditions may include pneumonia, sepsis, or inflammation of the heart, lungs (bronchitis), brain, or muscle tissues.

What to Expect When You Get a Flu Shot

If you have cancer, you are most likely to get your flu vaccine in the form of a shot.

Things to know:

- The shot is usually given in the upper arm, near the shoulder.
- You can choose which arm. You may want to choose the arm you use less (non-dominant) in case the shot makes it sore for a while.
- A short-sleeved or sleeveless shirt or blouse can make getting the shot easier.

The doctor's office is not the only place to get a flu shot. Most pharmacies have them available.

Be sure to tell the pharmacist about your cancer and any treatment. This may affect the type of vaccine you receive. Also let them know if you are allergic to eggs.

When is the best time to get a flu vaccine?

For most people, the CDC recommends September or October as the best times.

Flu vaccines may be available in July or August. Flu season can last into next spring. If you get your flu shot before September or October, your protection may run out sooner. Timing is especially important for older adults, who are more likely to develop flu-related illnesses. Your cancer treatment schedule may also affect when you can get a flu shot. These treatments may include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, or transplant or post-transplant treatment. If you do not get a flu vaccine in fall, don't worry. Getting it later still helps protect you.

Are there different types of flu shots?

Yes. Talk with your doctor or other health care provider about which form of the flu vaccine is best for you.

Most flu vaccines contain dead flu virus (inactive virus). However, the nasal spray vaccine contains a weakened form of the live virus. This could be dangerous if your immune system is weak from cancer or treatment. Always talk with your doctor about the type of flu shot recommended for you.

The person who will give your flu shot needs to know about your cancer, treatment, and any planned treatment before giving you the vaccine. Also, let them know if you are allergic to eggs, as some vaccines are developed using eggs.

Which flu shot should I get?

- ☐ Standard-dose flu vaccine
- ☐ High-dose flu vaccine
- ☐ Flu vaccine with adjuvant
- ☐ Cell-based flu vaccine
- ☐ Recombinant flu vaccine
- ☐ Nasal spray flu vaccine

Should my family and caregivers get the flu vaccine?

Yes. Getting the vaccine lowers their risk of getting the flu or getting as sick from it. This helps protect you, too.

How else can I prevent the flu?

- Wash your hands often.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Keep surfaces clean, especially those you touch often, such as counters, phones, and handles.
- Wear a mask in public if your doctor recommends it.
- Stay away from people who are sick. If you feel sick, stay home.
- Cover your mouth and nose if you cough or sneeze.

For people 65 and older

If you are 65 or older, you may need a stronger dose of the flu vaccine. To get the best protection, consider:

- Waiting until September or October for a flu shot, so your protection lasts through flu season.
- Getting a high-dose version of the flu vaccine. This has 4 times the antigens, which are substances that help your body build immunity.
- Getting a flu vaccine with an adjuvant. An adjuvant is an extra ingredient that helps your body build immunity to the flu.

Words to know

Adjuvant vaccine: A vaccine that contains an ingredient to help the immune system respond more strongly to the vaccine.

Chemotherapy: The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells.

Immunotherapy: Immunotherapy is a treatment using medication designed to boost the body's natural defenses to fight cancer.

Immune system: The body's natural infection-fighting system.

Pneumonia: An infection of the air sacs in the lungs.

Radiation therapy: The use of high-energy X-rays to destroy cancer cells.

Recombinant vaccine: A vaccine that uses DNA to create a small section of the original virus. This helps the body create a stronger immune response.

Sepsis: A dangerous bodily reaction to infection.

Vaccine: A product that helps the body's immune system prepare to fight off infections.

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