



2020 Influenza (Flu) Vaccination: FAQs for Organ Transplantation

October 21, 2020

Q: What is influenza (flu)?

A: Flu is an infection caused by influenza viruses that can spread from person to person and can cause:

- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Cough
- Difficulty breathing

Many people refer to colds or stomach illness as the “flu.” However, many of these types of infections are caused by other viruses that are not prevented by the flu vaccine (flu shot). Influenza can cause mild to severe illness and can lead to hospitalization or even death. Transplant recipients are at high risk of serious health problems from the flu. Getting the flu vaccine lowers your chances of getting sick with the flu and even if you do become infected with the virus, your symptoms will be milder, and you will be less likely to get complications.

Q: If I got the flu shot last year, do I need to get it again this year?

A: Flu viruses change every year, so the flu shot changes every year. This is to protect us from the types of flu that we think will be around us during the upcoming flu season. Therefore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that everyone 6 months of age and older should get a flu shot every year.¹ You should try to get the flu shot before the flu virus spreads in your area. The flu shot can take about two weeks for your body to be able to protect you against the flu virus.

There is a chance that both SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) and flu will be around us at the same time this upcoming Fall. It is best if you get your flu shot before the end of October 2020 if possible.² Even if flu is already in your area, you should still get yourself and your children flu shots. Flu seasons vary but can last from the Fall until late Spring.

Important note for the flu shot in children:

Some children from age 6 months to 8 years old will require two (2) flu shot doses this flu season (September 2020 through April 2021). If a child is getting their first ever flu

shot, **OR** if they have only gotten one (1) flu shot dose for their first-ever dosing last flu season, they should receive two (2) doses of flu shot in the next season (September 2021 through April 2022). The first dose should be given as early as possible, and the second dose should be given at least 4 weeks later.³

Q: Which flu shot should I get?

A: There are different flu shots available:

- Nasal mist
- Shot (an injection into the muscle).

If you are a transplant recipient, you should not get the nasal mist because this is a live (attenuated) flu vaccine. All other flu shots given by injection do not have the live virus. There are many options to choose from and the choices in your doctor's office can differ.

The most important thing is to get the flu shot every year, as long as you do not get the live attenuated one. You should talk to your doctor about how soon you should get the flu shot after your transplant.

If you have not been transplanted yet but are currently waiting for a transplant, you should get the flu shot as soon as you can.

Q: How well does the flu shot work after a transplant?

A: Vaccines rely on our immune system to protect against sickness. The immune system response to getting the flu shot may be less effective in transplant recipients. However, the flu shot has still shown to prevent severe problems that can happen from having flu, such as pneumonia and needing to be admitted to the hospital.

The amount of protection from the flu shot is different in each person based on many things, such as:

- How well the shot matches the types of flu that are around us that year,
- Each person's immune system response,
- The strength of the immunosuppressive medicines they take,
- How much a person has been around others with the flu.

Q: How soon after my transplant can I get the flu shot?

A: The flu shot may be given as early as 1 month after your transplant, but you should discuss with your transplant team to determine when it is best for you to receive the flu shot.

Q: Who else in my household should get a flu shot?

A: It is very important that all members of your household get a flu shot (NOT the live virus nasal mist shot). The best way to protect you and your loved ones from getting the flu is for everyone over 6 months of age to get the flu shot every year.

Transplant recipients may not build up the same amount of protection against the flu from the flu shot as someone who has a normal immune system. It is important for everyone in your household to get a flu shot so they can protect their loved one who is a transplant recipient. Each household member will lower their risk of getting the flu and lower the chance of passing the flu virus to the transplant recipient.

Q: Is the flu shot safe? What are the side-effects of the flu shot?

A: Flu shots have a good safety record. Hundreds of millions of Americans have safely gotten flu shots over the past 50 years, and there has been a lot of research that supports the safety of flu shots.

Common side effects from the flu shot include:

- Soreness
- Redness and/or swelling at area the shot was given
- Headache
- Low grade fever
- Nausea
- Muscle aches

Side effects of the flu shot are usually mild and go away on their own within a few days. You cannot get the flu from the flu shot.

Signs of a severe allergic reaction can include:

- Difficulty breathing
- Hoarseness or wheezing
- Swelling around the eyes or lips
- Hives
- Paleness
- Weakness and a fast heartbeat
- Dizziness

These serious reactions are very rare and usually happen within one hour of getting the shot. You should go to the closest Emergency Room if any of those symptoms happen to you.⁴

Q: What if I have had a bad reaction to getting the flu shot before?

A: Your history of allergies should be shared with your doctor before you get any vaccine or new medication.

Most people with egg allergies can safely get the flu shot. If you have had a severe egg allergy (anything other than hives) when you have gotten a vaccine, then talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated in a medical setting under observation.

If you have history of Guillain-Barré (a rare neurologic condition) or have had a severe allergic reaction to the flu shot before, you should talk with your doctor about how to safely get the flu shot. If you cannot get the flu shot, you should talk with your doctor about other options to prevent the flu.

Q: Will wearing a mask and following physical distancing be enough to protect me from the flu?

A: It is possible that people with the flu do not show any symptoms, so no single measure can provide total protection against getting the flu.

The flu virus and SARS-CoV-2 (virus that causes COVID-19) are both spread from person to person by respiratory droplets (wet drops that come from breathing out from the lungs when talking, coughing, or sneezing). There are many ways to prevent the flu including getting the flu shot, as well as ways for preventing COVID-19, such as social/physical distancing, use of face masks and frequent hand washing. These actions should not take the place of getting the flu shot. Following all of these precautions also greatly lowers your chances of getting the flu.

Q: Where is the safest place to get my flu shot during the pandemic? Isn't it risky to go to my doctor's office if I don't need to?

A: Flu shots may be available at:

- Doctors' offices
- Health clinics
- Pharmacies
- College campus wellness centers
- Schools
- Some employers

You should plan to visit one of these locations to get a flu shot, because the benefits of being protected from the flu are high enough to outweigh any risks of getting vaccinated. To lower your risk of being exposed to COVID-19, choose a place that offers the shot with a quick visit rather than a long wait. You also want to go somewhere that you can access easily that has clear guidelines for wearing masks and physical distancing.

Many locations are offering drive-up flu shots, so you will not have to exit your car. Most pharmacies will do this, but they do not advertise it. You can call the location you are looking to get your flu shot from to see if they offer this option.

If you are already visiting your doctor's office for an in-person appointment or going to your pharmacy to pick up prescriptions, ask for your flu shot to avoid the need to visit another location.

You can find a place that offers the flu shot here: <https://vaccinefinder.org/find-vaccine>.

Q: Does the flu shot protect me against the virus that causes COVID-19? What about a COVID-19 shot?

A: The flu shot will not protect against the virus that causes COVID-19, but it is still important to protect yourself from the flu during the COVID-19 pandemic so you stay healthy and require less medical visits.

Many of the symptoms from flu and COVID-19 are the same, so it could be hard to know which one of these infections you have. Patients who get both the flu and COVID-19 at the same time may be at risk for more severe illness. For these reasons, getting a flu shot is an important step to staying healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers are being cautious but hopeful about the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, but this should not change your decision to get a flu shot.⁶ When a COVID-19 vaccine is ready, guidance about getting a flu shot will not change. You should still get a flu shot this year, in the early Fall if possible.

Q: Can I receive the flu shot if I currently have COVID-19?

A: You should wait until you are no longer able to spread COVID-19 to others before you get your flu shot. If you have COVID-19 and do not know what to do about getting your flu shot, talk with your doctor to find out how and when to get your flu shot.

References

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4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD). Flu Vaccine Safety Information. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/general.htm>. Published 2020. Updated September 17, 2020. Accessed September 2020.
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6. Krammer F. SARS-CoV-2 vaccines in development. *Nature*. 2020.