

Bustle

What You Should Know About Getting Your Flu Shot During COVID, Explained By Doctors

Why doctors think your flu shot is more important than ever this year.



By [JR Thorpe](#)

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Between coping with late-summer heat, cleaning your masks, and explaining to relatives that you'll only attend cousin Marcia's wedding if it's on Zoom, the impending flu season might be low on your worry list right now. But it's coming at us fast. You might have all kinds of questions, or be hearing a lot of [myths about getting the flu shot during the coronavirus pandemic](#).

The first thing to know is that [getting your flu shot before winter hits](#) may be one of the best decisions you make all 2020. (Because we could all really use a win this year.) The flu vaccine won't protect you against COVID-19, since they're different illnesses, but it *will* keep you flu-free and protect those around you from getting sick.

"We encourage people to obtain the flu vaccination, especially this year," [Dr. Rebecca Gernon, M.D.](#), medical director at insurance federation Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Kansas City, tells Bustle. Nobody needs to add a week of sneezing and fevers to the giant dumpster fire that has been the past eight months. Experts are also keen to avoid a flood of hospitalized flu patients putting strain on the already-overwhelmed health system.

So put a reminder in your calendar, square up to your fear of needles, and let's dissect some of the misinformation going around about COVID-19 and the flu shot.

Myth 1: "The Flu Shot Isn't Important This Year"

Your biggest health concern in 2020 is probably coronavirus, and that's legit — but the flu shot is just as important, if not more so, this year as the Before Times. "If we can prevent people from getting the flu, it will help free up healthcare resources which have been stretched thin during the pandemic," [Dr. Teresa Bartlett M.D.](#), senior medical officer at claims company Sedgwick, tells Bustle. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) says that between [140,000 and 810,000 people are hospitalized annually with flu](#). In July, during the surge of cases in Florida, [56 intensive care units across the region hit capacity](#). You can do the math: hospitals are under enough pressure as it is right now without extra flu cases to deal with. Getting the flu shot this year means lessening the potential impact on our healthcare system, leaving it free to help COVID-19 patients.

Myth 2: "The Flu & COVID-19 Are Basically The Same"

Both are respiratory viruses that spread through coughing and sneezing, but coronavirus isn't the flu. "The [symptoms of COVID-19 are very similar to the seasonal flu](#)," Dr. Bartlett says. Both can produce fatigue, coughing, and fever, though COVID-19 can have a range of symptoms, from loss of smell to serious breathing problems.

While they might feel similar in a mild case, the two viruses are actually very different. "To put things into perspective, the flu usually results in an [average of 38,000 deaths each year in the U.S.](#)," Dr. Bartlett says. "In comparison, there have been [over 166,000 deaths related to COVID-19](#) so far." Serious cases of COVID-19 can lead to [difficulty breathing on your own and neurological issues](#); serious flu can cause [inflammation of the heart, brain, and organs](#).

"Because flu symptoms and COVID-19 are hard to distinguish clinically, it makes it more important to do whatever you can to prevent getting infected with the flu," Dr. Robert Quigley M.D., regional medical director of medical security company [International SOS](#), tells Bustle. If you get your flu shot and still get sick, it's a good sign you'll likely need a COVID-19 test.

Myth 3: "The Flu Vaccine Will Protect Against Coronavirus"

The [flu vaccine won't provide any protection](#) against the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. It [also won't raise the risk of getting it](#). They're different illnesses, and vaccination against one won't reduce the likelihood of the other. Plus, the flu vaccine is [tailored each year to specific strains of the influenza virus](#), so it can't even protect you against last year's flu, let alone COVID-19.

Having coronavirus and surviving it also [won't give you any protection against the flu](#), though evidence is growing that it'll [protect you from getting COVID-19](#) a second time. Scientists think certain antibodies should protect you from catching COVID-19 again — that's how vaccines work — but they're still learning about [how long antibodies last in your system](#), and how much protection they provide.

Myth 4: "Getting Flu & The Coronavirus At The Same Time Is Impossible"

Just like it's [theoretically possible to have the flu and a cold at the same time](#), some very unlucky people could get flu and COVID-19 this winter, and it will probably suck. It's a phenomenon [called a superinfection](#). "Scientists don't yet know how our immune systems will handle co-existing flu and COVID-19," Dr. Gernon says.

Myth 5: "It Doesn't Matter When I Get The Vaccine"

Waiting until late in the game to get a flu vaccine may be the wrong approach. "It is important that people get the [flu vaccine early in the season, but not too early](#)," Dr. Bartlett says. You should time your flu vaccine for September or October, before the midwinter period when flu tends to peak, she says. That way, you'll be covered for November and December.

"It may be harder to secure an appointment and get vaccinated as soon as you'd like," Dr. Quigley says. Booking an appointment in advance may save you worry.

Myth 6: "The Flu Will Stop Coronavirus From Spreading"

Flu and COVID-19 may influence each other this winter, but it's hard to know how. The BBC reports that increased handwashing and staying indoors [may mean the flu is less of a problem this year](#). Another factor is that having the flu could impact the spread of COVID-19.

"If SARS-CoV-2 resurges in the winter, it will be [one in a crowded field of wintertime respiratory viruses](#)," immunologist Stephen Kissler Ph.D. wrote for *The Conversation*. That may mean a few things: the flu could weaken people and make it easier for them to get coronavirus, or the flu virus could compete with coronavirus to replicate successfully, and push COVID infection rates down. In 2009, the [swine flu epidemic was kept at bay in Europe by a bunch of rhinoviruses](#) (coughs and colds) that flourished at the start of

autumn; the swine flu could only circulate in the community once the rhinoviruses had gone.

Will coronavirus be pushed back by the flu? It's impossible to predict what's going to happen this fall, but the flu won't stop coronavirus in our tracks. Even in the best case scenario, it'll just delay another wave of cases.

Myth 7: "Getting The Flu Vaccine Is Unsafe Because You Have To Go To The Doctor To Get It"

It's understandable if you want to avoid the GP's office right now, but Dr. Gernon says you should look into all your options. "We recommend getting the flu vaccine anywhere it is offered — urgent care, grocery stores, pharmacies, workplaces," she says. "If you already have an appointment scheduled, call ahead to ask if they can provide the flu vaccine to consolidate appointments." Dr. Bartlett suggests using [Vaccine Finder](#) to look up where flu vaccines are available in your area. Doctors are also [taking precautions to help people get their shots as safely as possible](#); wear a mask, make an appointment, and follow all their guidelines, and you should be completely fine.

Don't get your jab if you've been exposed to anybody with COVID-19 or are experiencing symptoms. In that situation, you should wait until you're 10 days symptom-free or have a clear COVID-19 test before venturing out.

Experts:

Dr. Teresa Bartlett M.D.

Dr. Rebecca Gernon M.D.

Dr. Robert Quigley M.D.