

9-23-2020

Forward Together Update [Flu Vaccine], September 23, 2020

University of Northern Iowa

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University of Northern Iowa

Forward Together Update—9/24/20

Wondering whether to get a flu shot this year? According to this trio of UNI public health experts, 2020 has become one of the most important years to receive a flu vaccination. Getting a flu shot could help stave off a “twindemic” of rising COVID-19 cases and a flu season that could leave health care facilities overwhelmed.

Why is the flu vaccine particularly important this year?

Disa Cornish, assistant professor of public health and education: Getting a flu shot is always important. This year, COVID-19 makes it extra important because of the risk of getting both the flu and coronavirus, or getting one right after the other. Both diseases are hard on the body, and getting hit with both could be disastrous. Getting a flu shot is one way to protect yourself from complications that could arise if you also get COVID-19.

Shelley O’Connell, executive director of Student Health & Well-being Services: It is recommended that everyone receive their flu shots in early fall as it takes two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection against flu. This will help with healthcare resources not being diverted to care for patients with influenza. We can focus our efforts on COVID-19.

Catherine Zeman, public health professor: The flu vaccine helps to prevent cases of disease that could initially appear to be COVID-19, may help prevent severe COVID-19 disease, and relieves pressure on the health care system.

What makes for an effective flu vaccine season?

Cornish: The national target set in the [Healthy People 2020](#) health objectives for the nation is 70%. According to that measure, we’d be successful if 70% of people ages 6 months or older were vaccinated against influenza. But only about 60% of people actually get vaccinated. We would also be successful if we reduced transmission rates and kept both the number of people who get the flu and the number of people who die from the flu very low.

O’Connell: Each year the flu vaccine composition is updated to three to four of the most prevalent strains. The effectiveness of the vaccine varies from year to year, but overall has good effectiveness. Getting vaccinated helps assure that herd immunity

keeps flu cases in the lower numbers. Vaccines range in effectiveness from 30-60% depending on the season, and they protect against approximately 3-4 different strains. Infectious disease specialists make very educated estimates of the genetic drift each year in the flu strains when they choose the strains to include in the vaccine. And again, this year there is evidence it may lessen the severity of COVID-19 if you do come down with it.

How would you respond to those reluctant to be vaccinated since it's not 100% effective?

Cornish: Very few things are 100% these days! Our priority is reducing risk and keeping our communities healthy. When you get a flu shot, you're protecting yourself and you're protecting others. Getting a flu shot benefits everyone.

Zeman: (The flu vaccination) is generally well-tolerated, will relieve burdens on the healthcare system and may help you recover successfully from COVID-19 if you do become ill with it. This is a win-win decision.

Won't quarantine/mask-wearing in an effort to reduce the spread of COVID-19 also reduce our flu numbers this year? If so, why should we get the vaccine?

Cornish: Masks will help with any airborne diseases. But we have all seen people not wearing masks, taking their masks off during the day, wearing masks under their noses. A flu shot is something you don't have to think about, don't have to put on every day, keep washed and ready to go. It's an easy and safe way to reduce risk - we don't have to think about it.

Zeman: Yes, it should (reduce flu numbers) but masks are not 100% effective. If we all wear them, they are high 80% effective. But it's only about 30% effective if others do not wear them around you. Further, co-infection with flu and COVID-19 is a huge unknown. And a case of the flu makes your immune system seriously weakened.

When do you believe a COVID-19 vaccine will be available? Should we expect that it will be about as effective as a flu vaccine?

Zeman: The COVID-19 vaccine will not be widely available until probably summer/late summer 2021 based on the estimates I have seen. Dr. Fauci has estimated that a successful vaccine will be about 50% effective. The data is still a bit too preliminary to know. However, it is reasonable to estimate that it will be about as effective as the flu vaccine.

Cornish: When we do get a vaccine, it is reasonable to assume that the rollout will take some time, with some groups (perhaps frontline health workers) getting it first, then people with underlying health conditions, then the general healthy public. It is unlikely that everyone will immediately have access to a vaccine the day it is released.

O'Connell: Public health authorities have indicated that there will be a COVID-19 vaccine for essential healthcare workers, EMS, police, and firefighters by early 2021. Studies are still being conducted on the effectiveness, so it is premature to predict at this time.

Resources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/vaccinations.htm>

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/season/faq-flu-season-2020-2021.htm>

Have health questions about COVID-19? Remember, you can call the [UNI Student Health Clinic](#) anytime at **319-273-2001** to speak with a health professional about your symptoms or to ask questions.