

Myths About Seasonal Influenza Vaccine
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Oregon Public Health Immunization Program

Influenza disease and influenza vaccination are complicated topics. There are a great deal of misunderstandings, myths, and misconceptions regarding influenza vaccines in the popular media. Here are some of the typical untrue beliefs about influenza vaccine.

Myth: Influenza vaccine will make me sick

This is a common misconception about influenza that stems from several issues. Some explanations could include:

1. People get the flu vaccine during flu season. It takes up to 10 days from your vaccination before you are protected from influenza. During this time, you may be exposed to influenza in the community. Exposure to influenza by an infected person can get you sick in about 2 days, before your vaccination has taken effect
2. Influenza vaccine can cause mild symptoms of influenza for up to 2 days after you've had the vaccination. This is sometimes misunderstood as having caught the flu. The actual disease causes much more severe symptoms than the vaccine, and lasts much longer.
3. Influenza season runs from September to May in Oregon. There are several strains of the virus in circulation each year. Some years the vaccine is not perfectly matched and vaccinated persons get a milder version of the flu.
4. Some people are not protected, even with the flu vaccination. This can be due to reduced immune system, improper vaccination or mishandled vaccine, or individual body differences that prevent immunity from vaccination. This is why it is critical that everyone be vaccinated to prevent the spread of influenza to unprotected people.
5. Influenza is often blamed for illnesses caused by other viruses circulating at the same time. There are hundreds of rhinoviruses, adenoviruses, and other influenza-like illnesses that are not preventable by vaccination. Some people become ill with one of these diseases and think they have the flu.

Myth: I Never Get the Flu

Some people don't get influenza disease each year, but others may have it and be contagious without knowing it. Some other interesting facts:

1. Only about 5-20% of the population get influenza each year.
2. Many infected persons do not develop symptoms of influenza, even though they are still contagious. Young, healthy people are especially likely to have influenza infections without feeling ill.
3. Influenza vaccination is not only about reducing your chances of getting influenza, it is to protect others in your community that cannot get vaccinated by reducing the spread of the virus and to protect persons with low immunity from coming into contact with the virus.

Myth: It is Better to Get Influenza ‘Naturally’

1. Influenza vaccine is effective at preventing influenza disease and reducing death and illness from influenza and its complications. It is effective at reducing the symptoms of influenza disease even if you are exposed to strains of influenza not included in the immunization.
2. Naturally-occurring influenza disease can cause many complications above-and-beyond the known issue of the respiratory illness itself. Influenza often causes secondary diseases such as sinus infections, ear infections, bronchitis, and pneumonia. Influenza disease can also impact persons with diabetes both by interfering with their personal disease management, but also by causing changes in the insulin-blood sugar cycle that can complicate the diabetes disease.
3. Influenza disease can last for up to two weeks and is responsible for many missed days at work, school, and can limit vacations. People are especially at risk for catching influenza during times of high stress and periods of poor sleep.

Myth: Influenza Vaccine Contains Mercury and Causes Autism

There is a long-standing myth regarding vaccine components and autism. This myth is perpetrated by misunderstandings and poorly-designed studies that have received a great deal of public attention. See the list of all influenza vaccines to see which do not contain the preservative on the main influenza site.

1. Thimerosal is used as a preservative in some influenza vaccinations. It is metabolized by the body as ethylmercury and is discharged in about 4 days. In contrast, methylmercury (quicksilver) is retained in the body indefinitely and is expressed in breastmilk. Methylmercury exists in our environment (mostly due to coal-burning electricity plants) and is known to cause many symptoms of heavy-metal poisoning.
2. Autism is not known to be caused by mercury (of any type). There have been several large, accidental contaminations of bread supplies with methylmercury, causing many thousands of toxic mercury exposures. Although symptoms of heavy-metal poisonings were noticed, the autism rates of those populations did not increase.
3. Only multi-dose vials of influenza contain Thimerosal because single-dose vaccinations do not require preservatives. If you have concerns about preservatives in the influenza vaccine, you may ask your provider if they have preservative-free vaccine available.
4. Thimerosal was removed from most vaccines in 1999 as a response to public concern. Autism rates in children do not appear to have been reduced by doing so.

Myth: I caught the “24-hour Flu” or the “Stomach Flu”

Everyone has heard some version of this one. This myth is perpetrated by a lack of knowledge about influenza disease and its symptoms. Influenza is a specific diagnosis based on certain disease characteristics.

1. The common symptoms of influenza can vary, but often include up to 10 days of: sneezing, coughing, runny nose, congestion, fever over 101 degrees (F), muscle aches, and headache.
2. Persons can have all or a mixture of symptoms, or can sometimes have no idea they are infected.
3. Stomach ailments and over-night sicknesses are not typical of seasonal influenza. These symptoms are probably caused by exposure to a non-influenza virus.