



## Why You Need to Stop Thinking of Flu as “Just a Bad Cold”

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly taught us a lot about how infectious diseases spread, how they can be prevented, and how certain people are at higher risk for severe complications.*

Enter, influenza (or flu).

If you think flu is just a bad cold, think again. Flu is a contagious viral infection that can cause mild to severe symptoms and serious related complications, including hospitalization and death—even in healthy children and adults. For those with a chronic health condition (such as heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, or diabetes), the risk of developing serious flu-related complications is higher.

Unfortunately, the 2022-2023 flu season is shaping up to be particularly bad in the US, with the highest number of positive flu tests and hospitalizations in more than a decade, as well as more than a dozen pediatric flu deaths reported so far this season. <sup>[1]-CDC-Early]</sup>

Here's what you need to know about your risk of developing serious flu complications—and how best to prevent flu in the first place.

### How Flu Affects People Differently



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Like COVID-19, flu is a respiratory infection that spreads when people with flu cough, sneeze, or talk. Although less common, flu viruses can also be spread by touching surfaces that an infected person has touched, and then touching your own mouth, nose, or eyes.


Because of how easily flu viruses can spread, anyone can get sick with flu. However, some individuals are at a higher risk of developing serious flu-related complications, including hospitalization and death.

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**Flu can be serious. Annual flu vaccination is the best way to protect yourself and your loved ones.**

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Who is at higher risk?<sup>[1]</sup>

- Young children (age 5 years and younger)
- Pregnant women
- Adults age 65+
- Individuals with certain chronic health conditions, including heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, and diabetes (even when the condition is well managed)



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Those with chronic health conditions in particular should take note: Getting an annual flu vaccine is as important to your health as eating healthy foods, exercising, and taking medications as prescribed.

- People with diabetes are more likely to die from flu-related complications after hospitalization.<sup>[2]</sup> Diabetes can interfere with the body's ability to fight flu, and flu infection can interfere with management of blood sugar levels.<sup>[3]</sup>
- People with heart disease face increased risk of serious flu-related complications and are six times more likely to have a heart attack within one week of flu infection.<sup>[4]</sup> This is due to the body's inflammatory response to the infection and the fact that the additional stress on the cardiovascular system could be overwhelming to an already weakened heart muscle.
- Flu can trigger asthma attacks<sup>[5]</sup> and can worsen chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) symptoms<sup>[6]</sup> by increasing inflammation in the lungs and airways.
- People with chronic kidney disease (CKD) at any stage, and those who have had a kidney transplant or are undergoing dialysis treatment, face high risk of developing serious flu-related complications due to their weakened immune systems.<sup>[7]</sup>

During recent flu seasons, nine out of 10 people hospitalized with flu had at least one underlying health condition.

Of concern, a 2022 [survey](#) commissioned by the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) revealed that nearly one in 5 individuals (22 percent) who face higher risk for flu-related complications (older adults and those with chronic health conditions) said that they were not planning to get vaccinated this season.<sup>[8]</sup>

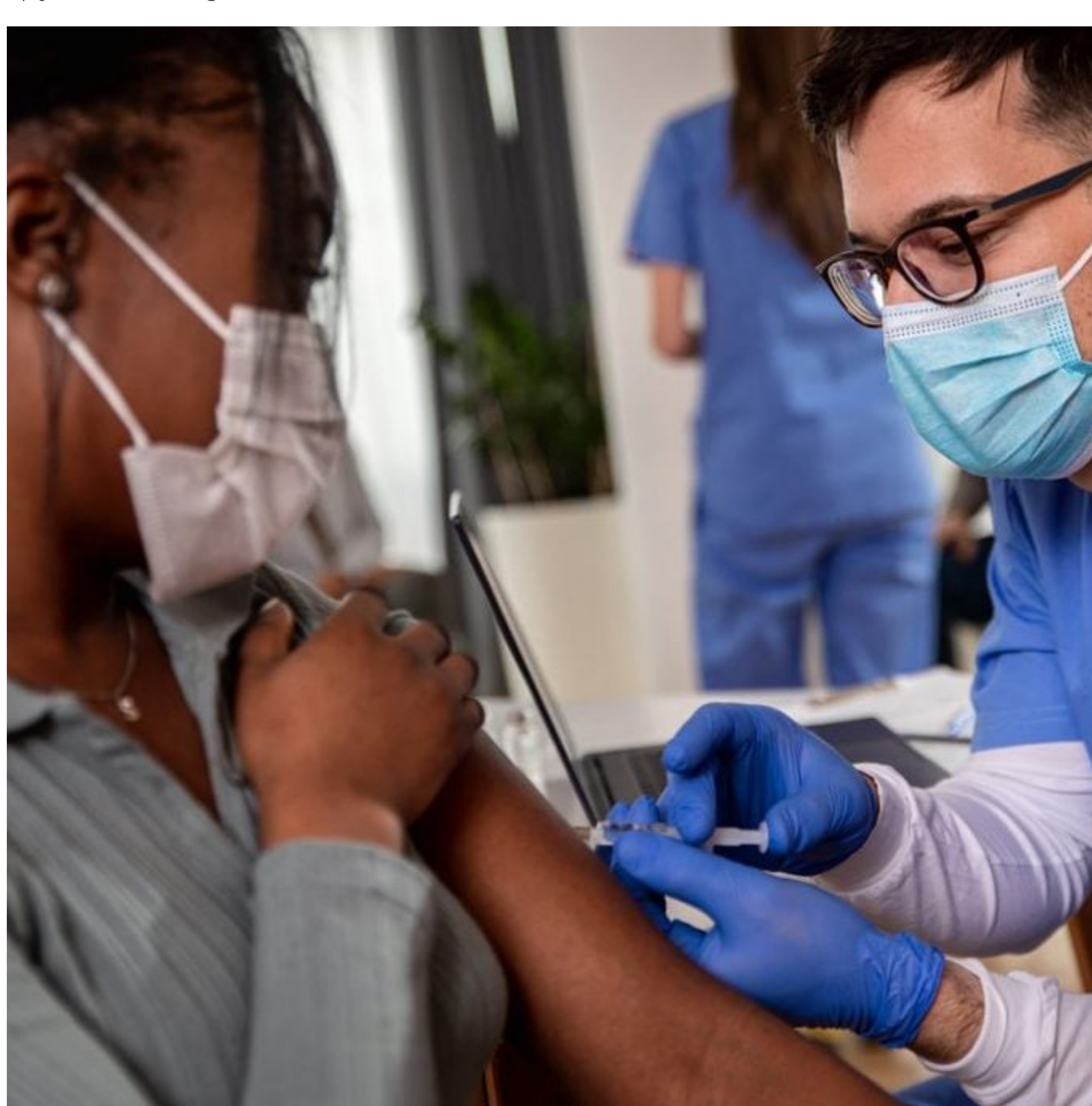
### How to Prevent Flu

Given the seriousness of flu, the best way to help protect yourself, your loved ones, and your community is to get a flu vaccine—every year. For more than 50 years, hundreds of millions of individuals in the US have safely received seasonal flu vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone age six months and older get vaccinated against flu annually.

If you are living with a chronic health condition, it is even more important that you take these three steps to help lower your risk of flu-related complications:

- Get vaccinated against flu every year
- Practice healthy habits to stop the spread of germs—wash your hands, cover coughs and sneezes, and stay at home if you are sick
- If you do experience flu symptoms, call a healthcare professional as soon as possible and take flu antivirals if prescribed

And if you've ever gotten a flu vaccine but still ended up with flu, don't think it was all for nothing. Even in cases when flu vaccination does not prevent infection completely, it can reduce the duration and severity of illness and can help prevent serious related complications, including hospitalization and death. So, roll up your sleeve and get to it!



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**It's not too late to get a flu vaccine.** While the ideal time to get vaccinated is before flu begins circulating in your community (typically September and October in the US), it is still beneficial to get vaccinated later in the season because flu viruses may continue to circulate. If you haven't already done so, get vaccinated against flu—now.

Founded in 1973, NFID is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to educating the public and healthcare professionals about the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases across the lifespan. To learn more, visit the NFID website at [www.nfid.org/flu](http://www.nfid.org/flu).

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