

Epidemic Flu: What you need to know by Douglas A. Samuelson

It's flu season. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a US Government agency, is urging every American to get vaccinated against flu. However, they concede that the vaccine is only partially effective and may pose some risks. What should you do, and how important is it that you do these things?

Let's look at some popular myths, and the facts.

Myth #1: Flu isn't that big a deal. Actually, mutated flu is the disease CDC worries about most. (Source: *The Next Pandemic*, by Aly Khan, 2017.) The 1918 influenza epidemic was the deadliest in history in terms of total number of fatalities, killing 50 million people in four months. That's about as many people as World War I killed in four years. (Source: *The Great Influenza*, by John Barry, 2009.) There have been a number of smaller but still big epidemics of flu and similar diseases since, most recently in 2010 with an estimated 285,000 fatalities. The 1957 "Hong Kong" flu epidemic killed about two million people.

Myth #2: Vaccination is sufficient. Vaccines are developed for the US each summer, typically including three or four strains of flu virus, based on what is circulating in the Southern Hemisphere. There are dozens of strains, so vaccines can't cover everything. In particular, they don't cover new mutant strains, which do occur from time to time.

Myth #3: Vaccines aren't worthwhile. The vaccines don't cover everything, but they do largely stop the strains included and boost your overall immunity somewhat.

Myth #4: If you do get the flu, there's no treatment other than to wait it out. Some antiviral medications work against many strains of flu. They are most effective if you start them within 48 hours after the first appearance of symptoms. (Source: <https://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/flu-guide>)

Myth #5: The best way to control spread is to cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. Good thing to do, especially if you do it with the crook of your arm rather than your hand. But frequent hand-washing with soap and warm water is more effective. Hand-to-hand contact spreads viruses more and faster than airborne droplets. (Source: <https://www.webmd.com/cold-and-flu/flu-guide>)

Myth #6: Staying home from work or school is enough. Good idea, but make sure what you do instead is better. If the kids get together at church or the mall instead of going to school, they'll infect each other just as quickly there. And you want to seek medical attention promptly, not just for yourself, but to alert the medical community that there's an epidemic happening. The difference between containment and a massive outbreak is about a week: faster identification of the disease is critical! (Source: National Academies of Science report, "Building Communication Capacity to Counter Infectious Disease Threats: Proceedings of a Workshop," 2017. <http://www.nap.edu/24738>) Some communities have plans to distribute medication at drop points around the city, rather than having people gather at clinics or doctors' offices (and create new spread opportunities.) Listen – or search online -- for guidance from your local public health department.

Myth #7: People far from me don't matter. In today's highly interconnected world, infections can spread quickly. When some people are infected, everyone is at risk. (Source: "The Coming Plague," by Laurie Garrett, 1994.) The more people have and use inexpensive health care that's part of the public health network, the better the chances of containing the epidemic before it can get to you.