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## **Getting a flu shot during pandemic is more important than ever**

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So far, COVID-19 has presented challenges for us as a state and as a community. It seems a potential vaccine may be on the horizon. However, as we make our way into the fall and winter months of 2020, another obstacle lies in our path — influenza, commonly called “the flu.” By now, you have seen the signs at your doctor’s office, your local grocery store or supermarket, and inside your local pharmacy store — “Flu shots available.” These signs encourage us to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and members of our community by receiving a flu vaccine. This year, those words, and those signs, are as important as they have ever been.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, estimate that there were 35.5 million influenza illnesses in 2019, more than 16.5 million hospital visits due to influenza, just shy of 500,000 admitted to the hospital, and unfortunately, more than 34,000 deaths attributed to the flu. In Arkansas, around 40,000\*\* individuals had reported influenza illness in 2019-2020 flu season. Arkansas also reported 118 deaths for last flu season, three of which were pediatric deaths. It’s important to know that not every flu case, medical visit, hospitalization or even death is captured as the CDC uses five different surveillance systems, all geared to provide a national picture of flu activity.

Influenza affects all age groups, but infants, young children, those aged 65 years and older, pregnant women, and those who have compromised immune systems are at a much greater risk of serious illness, and even death. Anyone can get the flu, and symptoms may include:

- Fever/chills
- Sore throat
- Muscle aches and fatigue
- Cough
- Headache
- Runny or stuffy nose

The Arkansas Department of Health recommends everyone aged 6 months or older receive a flu vaccine each year. The flu vaccine can keep you from getting the flu, make the flu less severe if you do get it, and keep you from spreading flu to your family and friends. A common misconception about the flu vaccine is that it can actually give you the flu. This is not true, and in fact, flu shots are made with inactivated viruses that will not cause illness. Another misconception is that getting a flu vaccine will increase your risk of getting COVID-19. This is also not true, and there is no evidence that getting a flu vaccination increases your risk of becoming ill from a coronavirus, like the one that causes COVID-19. Several studies have shown that flu vaccines reduced risk of hospitalization in adults and children. One study<sup>1</sup> reduced children’s risk of flu-related intensive-care unit admissions by 74%, and another study<sup>2</sup> showed that flu vaccination among adults reduced the risk of being admitted to the hospital by 82%.

Flu vaccines can be obtained at your local Arkansas Department of Health office (search for your local office <https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/local-health-units> ).

The Arkansas Department of Health also holds mass flu clinics at various locations throughout the state. The Arkansas Department of Health does not charge out-of-pocket costs to receive your flu shot and does not require insurance for receiving a flu shot, but you are encouraged to bring insurance information if you have it.

Flu vaccines can also be obtained at your employer (if offered), your doctor's office, your local grocery or supermarket store with a pharmacy, and your local pharmacy store. Your children's schools may also be offering mass flu clinics (see the schedule <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1X1DhzVQI1jEZ6OEwq0FbCEZhJBSh1qYkNXeSqAJ0Jl0/edit?usp=sharing> ). Each of these locations has trained healthcare professionals to administer your flu shot and help protect the health of you and your family.

\*\*Please note, **reported** influenza cases reflect only a portion of the actual number of influenza cases in the state.

<sup>1</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiu185>

<sup>2</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2018.07.028>

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