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## Get your flu shot before fall festivities, says Loyola infectious disease specialist

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While planning your family's fall festivities this month, add the flu shot to the list. Then follow through with a visit to your doctor to make sure everyone is protected for the flu season. October is the recommended month to receive the vaccine for your best shot at preventing the flu. "The flu usually peaks December through February but can start earlier and continue later," says Jorge Parada, MD, MPH, medical director of the Infection Prevention and Control Program at Loyola University Health System. "Everyone ages 6 months and older is advised to get vaccinated by the end of October, but earlier is better."

The flu vaccine takes two weeks from inoculation to develop immunity and become effective. "You can have the flu and not know it at the time of vaccination, or get it during the two week 'cure' period, which leads some people to wrongly believe that the flu shot gave them the flu," says Dr. Parada. "There are hundreds of strains of flu and it is possible to get sick several times throughout the season."

Unlike measles, mumps and other infectious diseases, the flu virus changes into many varieties every season, which means a flu shot is required every year. The flu must be tracked each year, starting in Southeast Asia where the flu season begins earliest. The year's flu shot is created based on what strains of flu are documented in Asia.

"Each year, international health organizations take their best educated guess at what top three or four flu strains will be most prevalent for the year," explains Dr. Parada, professor, Department of Medicine, Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine. "The flu shot serums target those top strains." The flu vaccination is available in a trivalent or quadrivalent variety. The trivalent flu shot targets two A and one B strain and the quadrivalent targets two A and two B flu strains.

"Most people get the trivalent but if the quadrivalent is available to you, go for more protection," says Dr. Parada. "The flu vaccine comes in several forms, so there is an alternative for everyone."

This year the targeted flu strains are derived from the H1N1 and H3N1-like virus and influenza B. "Last year the predominant strain of flu - H3N2 - mutated too much for the vaccine to provide immunity and more people became sick with the virus," says Dr. Parada. "This year, based on early reports, the new flu shot combination is more effective and on target."

In addition to getting a flu shot, using proper hand hygiene and cough etiquette will help prevent the spread of disease. "Wash your hands with soap and water often throughout the day and when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth with your arm rather than your hand to better trap germs and prevent passing a potential disease along," says Dr. Parada.

Dr. Parada recommends seeing your primary care physician for your flu shot. "At the doctor's office, the focus is on you and what is going on with your health. This is your time to talk about concerns to improve your wellbeing beyond the flu season," says Dr. Parada.

Retail stores that offer the flu shot do not know your medical history. "You trust your store employee to help you locate items you want to buy, not to diagnose what's causing a persistent symptom, schedule other annual health maintenance exams such as mammograms or offer expert medical advice."

Loyola is planning to distribute more than 30,000 flu vaccinations this season. "As health care professionals, it is our duty to protect ourselves, our patients and our community from sickness," says Dr. Parada. "Just as a construction worker wears a hardhat, a healthcare worker must get an annual flu shot."

As with other infectious diseases such as polio, mumps, chicken pox and whooping cough, the participation of everyone in receiving vaccinations is critical to stopping the virus. "When people are universally vaccinated, those infections are largely eliminated," says Dr. Parada. "It is everyone's civic responsibility to protect themselves and their community."

Millions of dollars are lost each year during the flu season due to missed days of work, expense of medications and the like. And many lose their lives due to the flu. "The most vulnerable members of our society, the very young and

the elderly or chronically ill, and pregnant women, are hit the hardest by the flu," says Dr. Parada.

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Source:

Loyola University Health System

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