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Here's why your 2021 flu vaccination helps you and others to stay safe and healthy

There are concerns that a third wave of COVID-19 infections will hit the country after the April break, which means it would likely coincide with the start of the flu season.

Where does having our yearly flu vaccination fit into all of this?

It is critical that we remain fully aware that there is still significant risk to us as individuals and as a country - now is not the time for false confidence or lowering of our guard against the ongoing risk of COVID-19 infections.

We are in control of the scale and timing of any third wave of COVID-19 in South Africa

South Africa experienced its first wave of COVID-19 infection from March 2020. A devastating second wave followed at the end of 2020, which carried through to the first part of 2021. There is now general consensus that the third wave of COVID-19 infection is likely to hit us sometime after the April holidays, coinciding with the start of the yearly flu season, which runs from May to August.

COVID-19 infections have, in the case of the past two waves, steadily increased at points where lockdown restrictions were eased. The recent easing of restrictions and the move to alert level 1 - just weeks ahead of the April holiday period - may encourage people to feel more relaxed about the threat of exposure to COVID-19. This can decrease their adherence to the preventive measures that curb the spread of infection.

It is important to note that even people who have previously had COVID-19 infection are encouraged to adhere to protective measures as they may still be at risk of reinfection due to natural immunity that has been shown to wane over time.

Under normal circumstances, flu (influenza) would be the only virus associated with severe respiratory illness during this time of the year. However, in 2021 we face the simultaneous threat of COVID-19 and influenza infections. These are both viral illnesses that spread through respiratory droplets. It also means that the preventive measures that protect us from exposure to COVID-19, also protect us from contracting the flu.

Can I get both flu and COVID-19 at the same time?

As the flu and COVID-19 are caused by different viruses, it's possible to get both at the same time. Both can cause serious illness and even death, depending on one's underlying health status and risk profile. While we wait to become eligible for a COVID-19 vaccination, the single best way to protect ourselves from serious flu, is to have our flu shot. A flu shot is available to everyone over the age of 6 months and specifically recommended for those who are at increased risk of flu-related complications due to age or underlying chronic conditions.

Now is the time to be doing all we can to strengthen our immune systems and to protect ourselves and our loved ones from both COVID-19 and this year's flu strains over the coming months.

How serious is the flu - can it cause severe illness?

For some people, contracting the flu can result in very serious illness. This includes children under the age of 5 with the highest risk for those younger than 2, people over the age of 65, pregnant women and people with underlying chronic illnesses.

Here's what you need to know:

Most people who get flu have mild illness with symptoms like fever, a dry cough, headaches, muscle and joint pain, sore throat and runny nose and generally feeling unwell. However, for some people getting flu can be serious or even deadly. Up to 5 million people across the world and 45 000 South Africans get severe flu illness each year that causes bronchitis or pneumonia, and almost half of these people need to be hospitalised.

Being vaccinated against the flu directly protects us from flu-related complications and saves lives. Having our flu vaccination decreases the likelihood of severe illness especially for those at high risk.

What can we do to stay safe and healthy against flu and COVID-19?

- Adhere to preventive measures, including mask-wearing, hand hygiene and physical distancing.
- Avoid gatherings, particularly over the religious holidays. We must ensure no super spreader events are allowed to happen - not only very large gatherings of many tens of people, but also smaller gatherings may become spreader events.
- Look out for the availability of the flu vaccine at your local healthcare provider or pharmacy in our network, and have your vaccination as soon as you can.

Does the timing of my flu vaccination matter?

To get the full benefits of the flu vaccination, you want to have it before the flu season hits, ideally in April as it becomes available. However, it will still offer you protection against serious flu even if you have it at any point during the flu season.

Can I have both a flu vaccination and a COVID-19 vaccination?

You can. Clinical guidance suggests that we should space the flu vaccination and the COVID-19 vaccination approximately two weeks apart.

Keep in mind that each vaccination provides a degree of immunity against the specific illness it's been designed to protect against. The flu vaccination cannot protect against anything but the flu. COVID-19 vaccinations only protect against COVID-19.

Can I get flu from a flu vaccination?

Flu vaccines have been in use since the 1950s and are perfectly safe. The flu vaccine contains dead (inactivated) flu viruses, so it cannot give you the flu. The inactivated viruses simply enable your body to develop the antibodies needed to fight the flu. Your arm may feel a bit sore where you were injected, and some people get a mild fever and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, but serious reactions are very rare.

According to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), the flu vaccine is about 50-70% effective in preventing the flu, but if you do get sick having had the flu vaccination will decrease the severity of infection.

Why do we need flu vaccinations every year?

Flu viruses are constantly adapting and changing and as a result the immune response developed against a specific strain of flu may not always offer protection against a new strain. This means that last year's vaccine will not be effective against this year's flu. That is why new flu vaccines are released every year to try to keep up with changes to the new flu strains that are most prevalent that year. That's also why you need a new vaccination each year. The vaccination usually provides protection for the duration of the flu season for that year.