

The flu shot: What can I do instead?

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Now that fall is upon us the television ads, health region campaigns and other pressures have begun encouraging you to get your “flu shot”.

Some of the information out there, like much of the info presented in the media on any topic, tends to be presented with the goal to invoke fear or guilt as a way to motivate, as opposed to simply to educate and inform. This is true for both sides of the flu vaccine debate.

I have put together some information on the flu and my hope is that I can help inform from my perspective on this controversial topic and to provide you with some strategies that you can do to help prevent flu naturally in your household this winter season.

The flu is a viral illness, different than a cold (Influenza = flu; Rhinovirus = cold) with varying symptoms and as it generally affects the whole body (think the body aches that come with the flu; vs a cold that is typically all respiratory) it can have more body-weakening effects and because of that can potentially lead to greater risk of complication.

The flu is an airborne pathogen, which means a strong immune system and proper hygiene including regular hand washing can readily fight the virus.

Because it is a viral infection and its manifestation in our body is proportional to the health of our immune system and our lifestyle habits when we are exposed to someone with the flu different outcomes are possible.

We might: 1) be exposed to the virus, have our system mount a rapid fire response and fight it off before we get any symptoms at all, 2) develop low-grade symptoms – maybe a fever, body aches and a cough, 3) have a slightly worse version that also includes diarrhea and vomiting. In the latter two cases we might be stuck in bed feeling like crap, but our bodies will get stronger from this challenge. Seriously. Not much different from the stress of training for a marathon in that when we challenge our bodies it can make them stronger. This has been an age old practice: think spiritual fasts, sweat lodge ceremonies, etc. Can you imagine what our bodies would be like if we never challenged them to get uncomfortable? we wouldn't build resilience, our muscles wouldn't get stronger, we wouldn't learn new skills. It is the same thing with our immune systems. Small challenges actually help them to learn to fight illness better than never being challenged in the first place.

Yes it is true that in some cases the flu can result in more severe fluid loss and loss of appetite that may necessitate IV-rehydration and anti-viral medications (the latter is rare) and in very unfortunate cases when a person has very low immune function they are at risk for secondary infection such as bacterial pneumonia which has the potential to be fatal in those seniors (mostly) whose bodies just cannot fight the infection even with antibiotics. Therefore careful consideration needs to be given in these cases.

Unfortunately these people are often in a “damned if you do, damned if you don't” situation: they are the ones most at risk of complications of both the vaccine and most at risk of the illness itself. In these cases it is likely most prudent to take the shot.

It takes about two weeks after the shot to develop the antibodies needed to protect you so during this time period one is actually more at risk of illness. And while you are developing the antibodies you may feel ill because it is not a virus itself that causes symptoms in the body it is how the body reacts to the virus. For instance when we sneeze or have a runny nose or a fever or shakes after exposure to a virus these are the body's mechanisms to attempt to flush it from our bodies, or heat it up enough to kill it off!

If you are considering the shot, it is important never to get the shot if you have an active infection or illness as your immune system is already compromised. Also the normal immune response following flu shot might not develop properly in those people undergoing immune suppressive therapy (such as systemic steroids or other stronger immune suppressing meds).

There are some known side effects to the flu vaccine: fever, body ache, allergic reaction and a potentially severe paralytic illness (Guillain Barre syndrome). These side effects are greater in children. There is also risk of allergic reaction in those with an allergy to eggs. Signs would be breathing difficulties, wheezing, hives, paleness, rapid heartbeat, dizziness. There are other less direct potential complications to vaccinations and those are hypothesized to be increased prevalence of thyroid and neurological disease (due to the adjuvant toxins in the shots), auto-immune diseases like RA, SLE, Hashimoto's, etc. (due to the way the shots interfere with the natural immune response).

In my mind when dealing with non-complicated cases (the vast majority of you!! I consider a complicated case to be someone with severe immune compromise, kidney disease, infirm elderly) I would suggest the following strategies in lieu of the shot. This doesn't mean you won't get the flu (but getting the flu shot doesn't guarantee that either!) but hopefully your chances will be minimized and these great lifestyle habits will make you feel all around better and more energized this winter season.

1. Wash your hands, wash your hands, wash your hands. Also, avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth, which can introduce the virus into your receptive passageways. If you cough or sneeze, use a tissue and throw the tissue away afterwards. This will help protect you and everyone else out there who is trying to avoid the flu.
2. Give your immune system a boost by taking Echinacea, Elderberry (superb anti-viral), Reishi (medicinal mushroom - fantastic immune support), Zinc (5 to 25 mg) and lots of Vitamin D (3000 IU).
For kids I love VitaKids Immune liquid by Douglas labs or Sambucol elderberry syrup. For adults I love Defense Plus by Nutribiotic or Natural Factors Anti-viral capsules or tincture.
3. Eat immune boosting foods: 5 to 10 servings of organic vegetables and 3-4 servings of organic fruit every day.
Include citrus fruits - loaded with Vitamin C, oranges, limes, lemons and grapefruit are a yummy, easy way to support your immune system. Grab a glass of fresh squeezed OJ or grapefruit juice. Even better, mix lots of lemons into water with stevia (a natural sweetener) and cayenne pepper. Not only is it a zingy tasty spice filled with Vitamin C, it also alkalizes your body, which helps it fight infection and enhances circulation and immune function. Other helpful

foods include Garlic, onions, thyme, oregano: make yourself a soup filled with these immune-boosting and anti-microbial ingredients. Garlic has been used to treat everything from the common cold to the Plague.

Carrots - Bursting with beta-carotene (pro-vitamin A), carrots give your body a leg up when you're fighting infection. Drink a few carrot juices to get enough in your body. Sweet potatoes and spinach also contain lots of beta carotene, so eat up.

Fish like salmon, mackerel, and tuna are filled with omega-3 fats, which support white blood cells in fighting viruses.

4. Rest, sleep and rest some more! Sleep is underrated. When you're well rested, your body fights infection more effectively.
5. Give up sugar, alcohol and caffeine for a while. Staying sugar-free, sober and decaffeinated helps your body mount immune responses. Get rid of processed foods and stick to a whole foods diet. Avoid mucous forming foods like milk and cheese that can trap viruses.
6. Drink green juice instead. If you have a juicer stashed tucked away pull it out and load it with kale, celery, cucumber, swiss chard, lemon, spinach, ginger, garlic- whatever you've got around that can support your good health.
7. Hydrate. Drink, drink, drink pure clean water. It keeps your mucous thin and helps you mucous membranes resist infection.
8. Supplement with probiotic bacteria, which supports the gut and mucous membrane lymph tissues and helps your body resist infection.
9. Get your exercise and get outside. While this may not be the best time to go to a crowded gym, a long walk in nature can do wonders for your immune system, your general health, and your psyche.
10. Sweat. Exercise to the point of sweating or use a sauna to get your body sweating. It is a great way to boost immunity and improve circulation. Natural periodic "fevers" help fight viruses. Another great tool is contrast showers. Alternate hot and cool when showering. 3 cycles and end with cold will do wonders for your vitality and keep you warmer through the winter as they improve hypothalamus and thyroid function.
11. Use essential oils. You can get a diffuser or simply drop some drops into a pot of water on low on the stove or add them to a spritzer to make your own air purifier. Great oils for boosting the immune system include oregano, rosemary, lavender, eucalyptus, clove.
12. Don't panic about the flu. Stress weakens your immune system and makes you less capable of mounting an immune response. Manage your stress in healthy ways, by meditating, listening to guided imagery CD's, walking, deep breathing, yoga, and other healthy stress-relieving activities.
13. There are homeopathic preparations designed as flu prevention. One of my favorites is Mucococcinum. An adult would take 1 tablet every 2 weeks and for those with lower immunity or children they would take 1 tablet each week through the cold and flu season.

You can also optimize the strength of your immune system by addressing outstanding health concerns with your Naturopathic Doctor or other health care provider! Not only will regular work with your Naturopathic Doctor address your health concerns as they arise (colds, flus, etc.), regular visits will assist you in identifying any underlying chronic health concerns and will help you to determine the daily healthy regime or additional supplements that are best for maintaining your optimal health!

Honestly in my mind (and this is personal and not meant to sway anyone in any way!) "better the devil you know than the devil you don't" - that is I would rather nurse myself and my kids through the flu using neutral baths, herbal teas, rest, garlic and onion rich broths knowing their little bodies are getting stronger for these challenges - than deal with possible exposure to things that we don't know the long term consequences of having injected into our bodies. These shots have been around since the 40s and many forms of odd unknown chronic, neurological and auto-immune diseases have also been on the rise exponentially since then. And I know there are many factors and there are no definitive correlations between the two, however for me it is simply not a risk I like to take, especially when it comes to an illness as generally benign as the flu. We are a society that doesn't like to take time out of our busy lives to get sick, rest and allow ourselves to recover. We feel like we "don't have time to get sick"! but I see people all the time that keep pushing themselves non-stop through minor illnesses and through life in general, and when we don't take the time to slow down, our bodies will often do it for us: colds or flus that we could normally fight hang on for weeks, we get burnt out, run down or worse. Perhaps allowing the odd cold or flu would give us short little rest breaks that we need to strengthen our immune system through allowing a natural immune response and grant us the chance to rest.

That being said this is an individual choice and all choices must be respected! I would never judge a family that concluded that taking the shot would be in their best interest. And there are definitely situations that this would be the case. That is absolutely fantastic when we can arrive at our own decision of what is best for us and this is something I support 100% regardless of the choice itself.

Hopefully this article has given you a little food for thought and you will be able to make a more informed choice when deciding to line up for your flu shot!