



**SUBJECT:** Communicating about Flu: Parents

**DATE:** September 24, 2017

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## The way you recommend flu vaccine matters.

### Presumptive Approach

Use a “presumptive approach” to help parents understand that flu vaccine is routine.

You can say: *“I see that Maria has not received her flu shot yet! I’ll get that ready for her now.” “Today we’ll be protecting your baby by giving flu vaccine.”*

### When a parent has questions... Know how to respond effectively!

#### 1. “My child got vaccinated last year and got sick anyway.”

Many other germs besides the flu cause symptoms similar to flu – your child might have caught one of them.

Flu Vaccine takes 2 weeks to work. Your child may have been infected with flu or another virus before developing immunity.

Flu vaccines are not 100% effective. However, flu vaccines can greatly lower the risk of severe complications from flu, including hospitalization and death.

You can say: *“Every year, the flu vaccine saves a lot of lives. Even if your child catches the flu, the illness will be much less severe. I encourage you to take advantage of the flu vaccine every year. It’s what I do for my kids.”*

#### 2. “I heard the flu shot can give you the flu.”

Flu vaccines are made with killed or weakened viruses that cannot give you the flu.

Sometimes the body's immune response after vaccination can make some people feel a little ill, and that's normal—it just means the body's defenses are working.

You can say: *“Flu shots are made from weak or dead viruses and cannot give you the flu. Flu vaccine may cause mild side effects that some may confuse with infection.”*

*For instance, some kids get a slight fever, but that's their body responding and building antibodies that will be there to protect them if they ever get exposed in the future.”*

### **3. “I'm concerned about flu vaccine side effects.”**

The most common side effect of a flu shot is the injection site being sore or tender for a few days.

Some children may feel a bit unwell as their body's immune system takes action to create immunity to flu viruses.

You can say: *“Vaccines, like any medication, can cause side effects. With flu shots most effects are mild, primarily pain or redness in the arm.”*

*This should go away quickly. If you have any concerns after, please call us.”*

### **4. “Flu vaccine is not effective, why bother?”**

Flu is very serious and can cause pneumonia, hospitalization, and death.

Even though the flu vaccine is not 100% effective, vaccination may make your illness milder.

A study in 2017 showed flu vaccination [lowered the risk of death for children by 65%](#).

You can say: *“Without the flu vaccine, your child has absolutely zero added protection if he/she gets exposed. It's not worth the risk.”*

*Healthy children who were vaccinated lowered their chance of dying from flu by 65%. That's pretty remarkable.”*

### **5. “I don't want flu vaccine with thimerosal/mercury”**

Most flu vaccine is thimerosal-free.

Only multi-dose vials contain thimerosal as a preservative to prevent contamination when needles are inserted into a vaccine vial more than once.

Thimerosal is called “mercury,” but it is not the type of mercury that causes concern. The mercury in fish, “methylmercury,” is the kind that needs to be limited, because it can build up in the body and become toxic in high quantities. Thimerosal contains “ethyl mercury,” which does not build up in the body and gets excreted quickly.

If parents are concerned, you can show this 2:50 video: [Is there Mercury in Vaccines?](#) by the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)

You can say: *“Flu vaccine with or without thimerosal is safe and effective. I understand your wanting to protect your child. That’s my interest too.”*

*Thimerosal should not be a cause for worry. There’s no evidence that it will cause any harm. On the other hand, a flu complication can take down a healthy child.”*

## **6. “The flu is just like a bad cold—it’s not serious.”**

Flu is sometimes confused with a cold. Flu viruses are *not* the same as a cold. When a person catches the flu, they often have a fever and body aches; most also have to miss days of work for a parent or school for your child. When complications set in, flu can be life-threatening. While babies, pregnant women, those with certain health conditions, and seniors are at highest risk, even healthy children can die from flu.

More than 900,000 people were hospitalized and about 80,000 people died in the U.S. from flu in the 2017-18 season.

You can say: *“Flu vaccines are very important to get every year. Flu vaccines help prevent severe illness and death from flu.”*

*I got my flu shot and immunized my kids, and as your doctor, I want your family to also be protected.”*

## **7. “My child is afraid of needles”**

If available, offer the LAIV (nasal spray) flu vaccine.

Let younger child sit in parent’s lap; practice distraction techniques. Suggest the parent bring a favorite snack, book or toy for comfort.

Allow an older child to listen to music and ask them to take deep breaths.

Reassure the parent and their child so they keep calm, and be honest about the pinch.

Be supportive and offer praise.

You can say: *“I know you seemed worried about your visit today, but you did it! I’m so proud of you for being so brave! Maybe it will even get a little easier next time.*”

**8. “My child is healthy and doesn’t get the flu. S/he doesn’t need a flu shot.”**

Flu viruses mutate constantly and change from year to year.

Every year, healthy kids who have never caught the flu before suddenly get it.

Flu can spread easily at school, playing with friends, or being out in the community.

Scarlet died from flu complications at age 5; to her mother’s regret, she was not vaccinated. Watch [Scarlet’s Story](#) and share with clinic staff and parents.

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