



Flu & People with Heart Disease or History of Stroke



People with heart disease and those who have had a stroke are at higher risk of developing serious flu complications. If you have heart disease, or have had a stroke, it is especially important that you get a flu vaccine every flu season to protect against flu and its potentially serious complications.

Among adults hospitalized with flu during recent flu seasons, heart disease was one of the most common chronic (long-term) conditions—about half of adults hospitalized with flu have heart disease. Studies have shown that flu illness is associated with an increase in heart attacks and stroke. A 2018 study found that the risk of having a heart attack was 6 times higher within a week of a confirmed flu infection. These findings were most pronounced for older adults and those experiencing their first heart attack. Additionally, a 2020 study that looked at more than 80,000 U.S. adults hospitalized with flu over eight flu seasons (2010-11 through 2017-18) found that sudden, serious heart complications occurred in one out of every eight patients (~12% of patients).

Vaccination is the Best Protection Against Flu

Flu vaccines are reviewed each year and updated as needed to protect against the latest flu viruses. Also, protection from vaccination decreases over time, so annual vaccination is needed to ensure the best possible protection against flu. A flu vaccine protects against the four flu viruses that research indicates will be most common during the upcoming season. More information about why flu vaccines are reviewed each year is available at [Vaccine Virus Selection](#).

Protection from flu vaccination sets in after about two weeks after getting vaccinated. In addition to reducing risk of flu, **flu vaccination has been shown in several studies to reduce severity of illness in people who get vaccinated but still get sick with flu:**

- Flu vaccination has been shown to reduce the risk of getting sick with flu as well as reduce the risk of having a serious flu outcome like a stay in the hospital or even being admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU).
- Flu vaccination has been associated with lower rates of some cardiac events among people with heart disease, especially among those who have had a cardiac event in the past year.
- More information is available at [Vaccine Benefits](#).

CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a seasonal flu vaccine each year, ideally by the end of October.

Types of Flu Vaccines for People with Heart Disease

- Flu shots are approved for use in people with heart disease and certain other health conditions. Flu shots have a long, established safety record in people with heart disease.
- People with **heart disease or history of a stroke should generally not get the nasal spray vaccine** (i.e., the live attenuated influenza vaccine or LAIV).

There are several flu vaccine options available this season. Your doctor or other health care professional can answer any questions you might have about flu vaccine.

Get pneumococcal vaccines.

- Pneumococcal pneumonia is an example of a serious flu-related complication that can cause death.
- People who have heart disease should also be up to date with pneumococcal vaccination to protect against pneumococcal disease, such as pneumonia, meningitis, and bloodstream infections.
- You can get either Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine or Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (but not both) when you get a flu vaccine.
- Talk to your health care provider to find out which pneumococcal vaccines are recommended for you.

Other Preventive Actions for People with Heart Disease or History of Stroke

Like everyone else, in addition to getting a flu shot, people with heart disease or who have had a stroke should take everyday preventive actions including avoiding people who are sick, covering coughs, and washing hands often.

What is Heart Disease?

Heart disease includes, but is not limited to, the following common conditions:

- Heart failure
- Hypertensive heart disease
- Pulmonary heart disease
- Heart valve disorders
- Arrhythmias including atrial fibrillation
- Congenital heart defects

Specific Health Actions for People with Heart Disease or History of Stroke

- Plan ahead to maintain sufficient supplies of your regular medications for your chronic medical condition(s) (e.g., at least a two-week supply).
- Do not stop taking your regular medications without first consulting your health care provider, especially in the event that you become sick with flu or another respiratory infection.
- People with heart failure should be alert to changes in their breathing and should promptly report changes to their health care provider.

Symptoms and Treatment

If you get flu symptoms call your health care provider right away. There are flu antiviral drugs that can treat flu illness and prevent serious flu complications. CDC recommends prompt flu antiviral treatment for people who have confirmed or suspected flu infection and who are at higher risk of serious flu complications, such as people with heart disease or people who have had a stroke.

Symptoms

Flu symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Some people also may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than in adults. People may be infected with flu and have respiratory symptoms without a fever.

Treatment

- Influenza antiviral drugs are medicines that fight against flu by keeping flu viruses from making more viruses in your body.
- Antiviral drugs can make your flu illness milder and make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious health problems that can result from flu illness.
- Treatment with an influenza antiviral drug should begin as soon as possible because these medications work best when started early (within 48 hours after symptoms start).
- You need a prescription from a health care provider for an influenza antiviral medication.
- There are four FDA-approved flu antiviral drugs recommended by CDC this season that can be used to treat flu.

When to Seek Emergency Medical Care

Anyone experiencing any of the following emergency warning signs of flu sickness, including people with heart disease or those who have had a stroke, should seek medical attention right away.

Emergency Warning Signs of Flu Complications

People experiencing these warning signs should obtain medical care right away.

In children

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish lips or face
- Ribs pulling in with each breath
- Chest pain
- Severe muscle pain (child refuses to walk)
- Dehydration (no urine for 8 hours, dry mouth, no tears when crying)
- Not alert or interacting when awake
- Seizures
- Fever above 104 degrees Fahrenheit that is not controlled by fever-reducing medicine
- In children younger than 12 weeks, any fever
- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical conditions

In adults

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Persistent dizziness, confusion, inability to arouse
- Seizures
- Not urinating
- Severe muscle pain
- Severe weakness or unsteadiness
- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical conditions

These lists are not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptom that is severe or concerning.