TIME FOR A FLU SHOT

This question might seem like a no-brainer, but answer it anyway: Would you like to avoid a hacking cough, fever and chills, and muscle aches?

If you answered yes, it’s time to get a flu shot. An annual flu vaccination is the best way to protect yourself from this highly contagious disease. The vaccine is a must for anyone who wants to reduce their risk of getting the flu—or spreading it to others.

Those who are prone to life-threatening complications due to the flu should always get an annual flu shot. This includes those with health problems such as asthma, heart or lung disease, diabetes, and pneumonia.

The best time to get a flu shot is as soon as it becomes available, which is usually in the fall. But getting vaccinated in December—or even later—is still beneficial. ■

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Breathing Well in Cold Weather

Cold weather can do more than make you chilly. If you have COPD or asthma, it can make breathing harder too.

That's because cold air is often dry. And dry air can irritate your airways, which can make you wheeze, cough or feel short of breath.

Still, some fairly simple steps can help you breathe easy this winter. Before you head outside:

> **Bundle up.** Warp a scarf around your nose and mouth to warm the air before it enters your lungs. Then breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

> **Take it easy.** If it’s truly frigid, don’t exercise outdoors. Work out inside instead.

> **Check air quality forecasts.** Air pollution can be very high in the winter, which can make it even harder to breathe. If the air quality is poor, limit your time outside.

> **Don’t go outdoors empty-handed.** Always take your quick-relief medicine with you. If you do have symptoms, be sure to use it as soon as they start.

Finally, remember that winter is prime time for getting the flu, which can be serious in people with lung diseases. So if you haven’t had your yearly flu shot yet, it’s time to roll up your sleeve.

Sources: American Lung Association; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Inhalers: Practice Makes Perfect

Many asthma and COPD medications are taken with the help of an inhaler, so you can breathe in the medication you need. The advantage of an inhaler is that it gets the medication directly where it needs to go. Inhaled medications also have fewer side effects than oral ones.

The only problem with an inhaler is that taking your medication is not as simple as popping a pill. It takes practice to get it right and getting it right is essential.

If you don’t use your inhaler correctly, you won’t get the right amount of medication. In fact, more than 95% of the medicine may not even reach your lungs, according to the American Thoracic Society. That can be a big problem when it comes to controlling your symptoms.

So, if you use any type of inhaler to stay in control of COPD or asthma, be sure you:

> Ask your healthcare provider how to use your inhaler correctly.
> Check back in with your provider every once in a while to review your inhaler technique.
> Ask for help if you are having trouble getting it right. Your provider may recommend a device called a spacer. This can make it easier to inhale the medication. Or you may need to switch to a different type of inhalation device altogether.

 Spirometry: A Must-Have Test

To help you breathe better, your healthcare provider needs to know how well your lungs are working. One way to find out is with spirometry.

Done regularly, this test shows if your lung function has changed over time—useful information that can guide your treatment plan.

Here are three common questions you may have about this test:

> What does it measure? Spirometry gauges how much air you can inhale and exhale and how fast you can exhale.
> How is it done? You take a deep breath into the spirometry machine and then blow out as hard as you can so the machine can read your results.
> Why do it? Spirometry is an important test. It helps your healthcare provider know whether your asthma or COPD is well controlled. If the results show that your treatment isn’t working as well as it should, then your provider can make adjustments to your medication.

Sources: American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
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