

ALS and a Strange Flu Season

This week, *Time* reported that flu patterns have been unusual this season, which means it is a good time to talk about ALS and the flu.

People with ALS often experience a wide variety of challenges related to weakened swallowing and respiratory muscles, including difficulty managing saliva, coughing and clearing secretions. Consequently, it's imperative to take steps to avoid any respiratory infections, especially the flu.

Because they are at increased risk for respiratory problems associated with viral and bacterial infection, the flu can deliver a harsh blow to people with ALS. It can cause decreased appetite and a severe cough, significant problems for the ALS community.

The CDC recommends getting a flu shot every year because the influenza virus mutates over time, and the flu vaccine is designed to protect against three to four viruses that are believed to cause disease in the current year. It can take up to two weeks for your body to build up antibodies to fight the flu after receiving the vaccine, and you are at higher risk of contracting the flu if you are not vaccinated. Although it's recommended that people get a flu vaccine by the end of October, getting vaccinated through January or later is still beneficial.

The vaccine is also available in two forms: as an injection made of inactivated virus, and as a nasal spray made of live but weakened virus. The nasal spray may be troublesome for many people with ALS due to potential issues with weakened swallowing muscles, thickened secretions and nasal congestion. The injection may be a less stressful and safer option for people with ALS. Most insurance plans cover the flu shot, and it is readily available at most primary care offices, ALS clinics, health departments and pharmacies throughout the community.

People living with ALS, as well as their family and caregivers, should talk with their physician to see if they might be good candidates to receive the

vaccination. However, some individuals with certain allergies, e.g. eggs, or other medical conditions should not receive the flu vaccine.

A few other simple precautions can make a difference. Whenever possible, avoid rubbing your eyes, nose and touching your face. Frequently wash your hands with soap and warm water or use hand gels when facilities are not available. Try to avoid large crowds, and reschedule visits with family and friends who are currently battling a cold or the flu to reduce your risk. Go to the CDC's [website](#) for more information on how to protect yourself and your family this flu season.