

Influenza and Heart Attacks

Influenza season is starting to move into high gear. Many people know about the direct risks of coming down with an illness like influenza – fever, aches, a headache, a cough that seems to wrack your bones when you start up and a nagging inability to get that last bit of phlegm up and out of your lungs.

On top of that there's fatigue and de-conditioning, whatever level of activity you did before, you'll have to work hard to get back to that same level. This sounds like more than enough reason to avoid getting "the flu". If we need any more incentive there's been a fair bit of research that's come out in the last few years that provides even more reasons to get the flu shot.

Heart attacks. Yes, one of the conditions we are hyper aware of and spend so much time trying to prevent by watching what we eat, exercising, keeping tabs on our blood pressure etc, appears to be one of the after effects of influenza infection in some people.

It may not be a surprise that about half the people who end up in hospital because of an influenza infection have underlying issues with heart disease. Some new studies have shown that there's more to the connection than being more likely to end up in hospital if you have heart disease.

A 2018 study found people were 6 times more likely to have a heart attack within a week of coming down with a case of confirmed influenza. This was even more pronounced if the

individual was an older adult. Another study from 2020 looked at 80,000 patients hospitalized with influenza in the USA and found that one out of 8 (about 12%) ended up having some sort of serious and sudden heart issue. So right when your lungs are being forced to work extra hard, along comes a heart issue to knock you down again.

This is where vaccination can make a difference, particularly in those who have heart disease or have had a stroke. Vaccination with the influenza vaccine has been shown to be protective against heart attacks after influenza infection even in those who have had a recent heart attack. There are different types of influenza vaccine. In general they're composed of 2 strains of influenza A and 2 strains of influenza B.

The strains are selected out of the many circulating to counteract the ones predicted most likely to cause an issue in the coming flu season. The vaccines will either have a very weak form of the virus or portions of the virus that will trigger our immune system.

On top of the flu vaccine, those at risk for heart disease are encouraged to take a pneumococcal vaccine to protect against some specific types of pneumonia, meningitis and other infections. Have a discussion with your health care provider and find out which options for flu vaccine and pneumococcal vaccine are best for you.

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