Hot ... Or Not? Viral Matchmaking

Flu vaccine advocacy starts by understanding why so many people shun the shot. The problem may lie with a popular misconception that the flu shot simply doesn't work.

The influenza vaccine fights the flu, although its e□ectiveness varies from year to year. An exceptionally high rate of mutation enables the flu virus to mask itself from vaccine antibodies by changing surface proteins. As a result, although influenza epidemics occur every year, the severity of these epidemics, as measured by physician visits and hospitalizations, can di□er substantially from season to season. The protection provided depends on a myriad of factors: a person's age and health status, and the similarity or "match" between the viruses or virus in the vaccine and those in circulation.

Even a less e□ective vaccine confers more protection than none at all – and has been shown to reduce the severity of illness in people who get vaccinated but still get sick. According to the CDC, flu vaccination reduced deaths, intensive care unit (ICU) admissions, ICU length of stay, and overall duration of hospitalization among patients. Vaccinated adults spent on average four fewer days in the hospital than those who were not protected.

The CDC recommends that anyone six months of age and older should get a flu vaccine every season. The