10 days at a St. Louis hotel with catered meals and a $3,500 payday? All you have to do is get the flu virus at 'Hotel Influenza'

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Plenty of room at the “hotel influenza.” Any time of year, you can catch it here.

Call it a “sickation” — a 10- to 12-day hotel stay to help St. Louis University researchers test the effectiveness of flu vaccines. Volunteers will get a flu shot or a placebo, and then they’ll get a dose of a flu virus delivered through a nasal spray.

The participants will be watched around the clock for symptoms of the flu — fever, runny nose, sneezing, cough. Their blood and mucus will be repeatedly tested for signs of the virus, and those who do come down with the flu must test negative for two consecutive days before checking out.
The Extended Stay Research Unit is expected to welcome its first “guests” within the next year. The university spent about $350,000 to convert 24 hotel rooms in its Salus Center, formerly the Water Tower Inn at South Grand Boulevard and Lafayette Avenue, to a quarantined medical unit. A nursing station and exam room were created out of hotel rooms. Common areas offer reading nooks, couches and game tables for socializing.

The “human challenge” unit is one of only a handful worldwide designed to test vaccines or treatments on people after exposing them to a disease.

By controlling the study environment, “you can learn a lot more, a lot faster” about whether vaccines work to prevent infection, said Dr. Daniel Hoft, director of SLU’s Center for Vaccine Development.

In a typical flu vaccine trial, people are vaccinated and then tested to see if they produce antibodies to fight the virus, regardless of whether they are exposed to it. With the human challenge, the virus makes a direct hit.

“You are not waiting for nature to take its course,” Hoft said.

The search for an effective flu vaccine, and ultimately a universal vaccine that would protect against all strains of the virus, is a critical focus for infectious disease researchers. When the vaccine is ineffective, like in the previous winter, illnesses soar. The 2017-2018 flu season ended as one of the most severe on record, causing about 134,000 infections and 279 deaths in Missouri alone. The seasonal flu shot was only about 10 percent to 15 percent effective against the circulating strains, Hoft said.

The studies will require U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval and must pass SLU’s internal review process. When considering the ethics of human research, the potential benefits are weighed against the severity of the illness in question and the participants’ understanding of their risk, said Stephanie Solomon Cargill, associate professor of health care ethics at SLU.

“The real question for me ethically is, if you’re not benefiting people, you have to be careful about not harming them too much, and they know what they are getting into and are freely choosing it,” she said. “You wouldn’t want to expose someone to a permanent illness with no cure.”

Hoft said the center was designed to meet standards for preventing the spread of tuberculosis, which has more stringent guidelines than the flu. All air is circulated and filtered separately from the rest of the building. Staff and study participants must enter through two sets of doors. The participants will be required to stay until they are no longer contagious, and they will not be allowed to have visitors.

“We’re doing everything we possibly can to be as safe as possible,” he said.
For their trouble and possible sickness, volunteers will be paid about $3,500. If they do need medical care, the costs will be covered. Participants must be young and healthy, a population less likely to develop severe side effects from the flu.

Of course, researchers hope that those who get the vaccine don't get sick. Then they'll just get an indoor vacation complete with catered meals, TV, internet, a gym and views of the Arch.

Welcome to the hotel influenza. Such a germy place.
University offers $3,500 to get sick and stay in “Hotel Influenza”

June 8, 2018

ST. LOUIS, Mo. – Looking to take 10 days off from work and get paid for it? St. Louis University may be willing to fund your getaway. But there's a catch: You have to get sick and stay quarantined at "Hotel Influenza."

The university has converted a 24-room hotel into a research center and is looking to intentionally expose their "guests" to the flu, all for the sake of science, CBS St. Louis reports. The SLU team says the project will help them test new vaccines for the illness.

This flu season was the deadliest for kids in almost a decade

"Human challenge studies are a way to get a lot of information quicker, with a smaller number of volunteers and less cost than a traditional vaccine study," Dr. Daniel Hoft said in a university news release. He said it's the ideal environment for testing possible universal flu vaccines — a holy grail of influenza research which would offer protection against many different strains of the virus.

To make the challenge more enticing, SLU is offering volunteers $3,500 in exchange for their time and travel to "Hotel Influenza" — officially called the Extended Stay Research Unit. The university adds that the 24 guests will be cared for around the clock by a team of nurses and will have access to TV, internet, and their own private bathrooms.

"Common areas with comfy chairs offer spaces to socialize, read or watch TV with picture-window views of the Arch. Catered meals are served," the press release promises.

The study volunteers will be given either a dose of the experimental vaccine or placebo before their stay begins. They will then be infected with a dose of flu virus delivered through a nasal spray. The volunteers will remain quarantined for about 10 days while researchers study the effects of the vaccine.

"If a challenge trial shows the vaccine protected a small group of volunteers against flu, you can be much more confident the vaccine is more likely to be worth the hundreds of millions of dollars of investment to go through phase 3 development," Hoft said.

The university says it hopes to begin the first pilot program at "Hotel Influenza" by the end of 2018.
University researchers are hoping that $3,500 will convince enough people to risk possibly suffering through a bout of diarrhea, fever, body aches and other flu symptoms in the name of science. The pitch is for volunteers to willingly expose themselves to the influenza virus after receiving either the flu vaccine or a placebo, in hopes that the results will lead to a better understanding of the illness.

“In a traditional flu study, we vaccinate people and see if their immune systems respond by creating antibodies that fight flu,” Daniel Hoft, director of Saint Louis University’s Center for Vaccine Development, said in a statement. “In a human challenge study, we vaccinate people, then deliberately challenge their bodies by exposing them to flu to see if they get sick.”
The study will require volunteers to be quarantined for 10 days at the university’s former hotel which was converted into a research room suite and is now being dubbed “Hotel Influenza.” Volunteers will stay in hotel-style rooms with private bathrooms, television and Internet. Researchers will observe the volunteers, conduct blood and lung tests and take nose swabs to see if they are infected with the flu. They will not be able to leave until they test negative for two days.

“You know when they’re exposed to the flu, so can plan exactly when to study it,” Hoft said. “You are not waiting for nature to take its course. If a challenge trial shows the vaccine protected a small group of volunteers against the flu, you and be much more confident the vaccine is more likely to be worth the hundreds of millions of dollars of investment to go through phase 3 development.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recorded 121 influenza-associated pediatric deaths for the 2017-2018 flu season, while also noting a record-breaking number of hospitalizations across all ages.
The "Hotel Influenza" probably won't appear in any of your Priceline searches for St. Louis, Missouri. If it does, then it better not charge you any money.

No, instead the Extended Stay Research Unit at St. Louis University's (SLU) Center for Vaccine Development (dubbed the "Hotel Influenza" in their press release written by Nancy Solomon) will pay you around $3500 (which also will cover travel expenses) to stay in hotel-style rooms, equipped with private bathrooms, televisions, the Internet, and common areas with comfy chairs. You also get catered meals in the dining room and kitchen area, access to exercise equipment, and nice views of the St. Louis Arch.
Let's see, what else? Oh, at the "Hotel Influenza," you get intentionally exposed to the influenza virus. Such a lovely place.

Anything unusual about these arrangements? Not used to having comfy chairs? Think televisions are unusual in a hotel? Oh, yes, you are wondering why you need to get exposed to the flu virus?

That's the catch, or what you may catch, when staying at the "Hotel Influenza." The Unit is for conducting human challenge studies. In a human challenge study, humans are deliberately exposed to something, usually unpleasant or potentially harmful. That's why it is called a "challenge" study rather than a "wonderful feeling" study or "easy street" study and you don't tend to hear of compliment or yummy food challenge studies.

In this case, if you volunteer, you first receive a flu vaccine or a placebo (i.e., a fake vaccine) and then later get exposed to the flu virus. For example, someone may shove the flu virus up your nose. Researchers can culture the flu virus in a lab and put it on a big Q-tip, which then goes right up your nostril. Yes, any time of year, any time of year, you can find flu here.

Then, the research staff is programmed to receive, following and testing you to see if you actually develop the flu and flu symptoms. You can't quite check out any time you'd like. The study lasts long enough to ensure that you are no longer shedding virus (usually about ten days) and thus may infect others outside the research unit.
Docs Need Patients to Stay at Hotel, Get the Flu
ST. LOUIS (AP) — Guests can get paid $3,500 to stay at a St. Louis hotel for up to 12 days with catered meals, as long as they sign up to be exposed to the flu virus.

A St. Louis University research unit is testing the effectiveness of flu vaccines by paying volunteers to stay at its Salus Center, formerly the Water Tower Inn, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. Participants will be given a flu shot or a placebo, and then receive a dose of a flu virus through nasal spray.

The volunteers will then be observed for flu symptoms, such as fever, runny nose, sneezing or coughing. The Extended Stay Research Unit will repeatedly test participants’ blood and mucus for signs of the virus.

The university spent about $350,000 to convert 24 hotel rooms at the Salus Center into a quarantined medical unit, equipped with reading nooks and game tables for socializing.

The “human challenge” unit is one of only a few across the world that’s designed to test vaccines or treatments on people after exposing them to a disease.
Dr. Daniel Hoft, director of the university’s Center for Vaccine Development, said “you can learn a lot more, a lot faster” about whether vaccines work to prevent infection by controlling the study environment.

The 2017-18 flu season was one of the most severe on record. About 134,000 infections and 279 deaths were reported in Missouri. The seasonal flu shot was between 10 and 15 percent effective against the strains, Hoft said.

“The real question for me ethically is, if you’re not benefiting people, you have to be careful about not harming them too much, and they know what they are getting into and are freely choosing it,” said Stephanie Solomon Cargill, an associate professor of health care ethics at the university. “You wouldn’t want to expose someone to a permanent illness with no cure.”