

Facts About Influenza for Adults

What is influenza?

Influenza (flu) is a contagious viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs that usually occurs in the winter months and can cause severe illness. In the Northern Hemisphere, influenza activity generally occurs during December – March, but activity can occur as early as October and as late as May in some years. Influenza is spread easily from person to person, primarily when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Influenza may lead to hospitalization or even death, especially among the elderly. On average, between 5% and 20% of the population contract influenza, 200,000 are hospitalized, and 36,000 die from influenza-related complications annually.

Prevention

Influenza vaccination can prevent influenza. The best time to vaccinate is October and November, although the vaccine can also be offered in September and should continue to be offered in December and later. Because influenza viruses change from year-to-year and because immunity to influenza viruses wanes within a year after vaccination, it is important to get vaccinated against influenza every year.

Symptoms

Typical influenza illness is characterized by the abrupt onset of fever, chills, cough, headache, runny nose, sore throat, and muscle and joint pain. Unlike other common respiratory infections that are often called “the flu,” influenza can cause more severe illness that can result in complications leading to hospitalization and death.

Who should get influenza vaccine?

- ◆ People 50 years of age or older
- ◆ Children 6-59 months of age
- ◆ Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities.
- ◆ Adults and children 6 months or older with chronic pulmonary or cardiovascular disorders, including asthma.
- ◆ Adults and children 6 months or older who are immune suppressed because of a disease they are born with, infection with human immunodeficiency virus, long-term treatment with steroids or similar medications and/or are undergoing anti-cancer treatment.
- ◆ Adults and children 6 months or older with chronic illnesses (including diabetes mellitus), kidney diseases, and blood cell diseases such as sickle cell anemia.
- ◆ Adults and children who have any condition (e.g., cognitive dysfunction, spinal cord injuries, seizure disorders, or other neuromuscular disorders) that can compromise respiratory function or the handling of respiratory secretions or that can increase the risk for aspiration;
- ◆ Pregnant women.
- ◆ Persons 6 months to 18 years of age who receive long-term aspirin therapy.
- ◆ Household contacts and out-of-home caregivers of any of the above groups, and infants <6 months.
- ◆ Health care providers having contact with people in any of the above groups, and infants <6 months.

Vaccine Safety

Two different types of influenza vaccine are available.

Inactivated injected vaccine

The inactivated influenza vaccine can be given to persons aged 6 months and older. It is usually given as a shot in the upper arm or in the thigh. There may be some mild soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site which may last 1-2 days. Other possible mild side effects include a headache and low-grade fever for a day after vaccination.

Live, intranasal vaccine

The live, intranasal vaccine can be given to healthy persons 5-49 years of age, but should not be given to persons with chronic medical conditions. In addition, it should not be given to pregnant women or to persons who are in close contact with severely immune-suppressed person. There may be a runny nose, headache, low-grade fever, sore throat, fatigue, or cough after vaccination

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For 2006-2007, two different types of influenza vaccine are available: the familiar injectable inactivated influenza vaccine (IIV) and a live attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV) administered as a nasal spray. IIV is licensed and approved for use by people 6 months of age and older with or without chronic medical conditions. LAIV is licensed and approved for healthy people 5 to 49 years of age. Recommendations for the use of both vaccines are posted on the Website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/nip/publications/ACIP-list.htm>.

- FACT:** Influenza can be prevented with safe, effective vaccines.
- FACT:** To protect young children <6 months of age from influenza and its complications, adults, other household members of young children, and out-of-home caregivers of children <6 months should be vaccinated.
- FACT:** On average, 36,000 people in the U.S. die each year from influenza and complications arising from influenza, including an average of 92 deaths each year in children <5 years old. Greater than 90% of deaths occur in persons 65 years and older.
- FACT:** During the 1990's, an average of 200,000 people were hospitalized each year for influenza-related complications.
- FACT:** Total direct hospitalization costs of a severe influenza epidemic are estimated to be over \$3 billion.
- FACT:** Inactivated influenza vaccine is paid for by Medicare Part B if the health care provider accepts the Medicare-approved payment amount.
- FACT:** Because influenza viruses can change from year to year and because protection from the vaccine does not last more than 1 year, an annual influenza immunization is necessary each fall.
- FACT:** Influenza vaccine will not protect you from respiratory infections caused by viruses other than influenza. Many respiratory illnesses are often called "the flu", but only some of these illnesses are actually caused by the influenza virus.
- FACT:** Influenza can worsen chronic heart disease, lung disease and diabetes, and can lead to bacterial or viral pneumonia.