

Seasonal Influenza (flu) Fact Sheet 2015-2016

What is influenza?

Influenza (also known as flu) is a respiratory infection caused by influenza A and B viruses. It infects the nose, throat, and lungs. It is not to be confused with “stomach flu” and other illnesses. Influenza occurs worldwide and usually during the late fall and winter months in Canada. People of all ages can get infected. Symptoms typically include the sudden onset of headache, fever, chills, loss of appetite, muscle aches and fatigue. A cough usually develops, and runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation may be present. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may also occur, especially in children. Most people will recover within a week to ten days, but the cough and fatigue can take much longer to resolve.

How is influenza spread?

Flu spreads easily from infected persons through droplets from coughing and sneezing. You can also get influenza by touching surfaces that have been contaminated with the virus by an ill person such as toys, doorknobs, utensils, or unwashed hands and then touching your eyes, mouth, or nose.

Who is at high risk for flu-related complications?

Complications of influenza can include bacterial infection, pneumonia, worsening of certain health conditions, and hospitalization. People at greater risk are:

- adults and children with certain chronic medical conditions including anemia, asthma, lung, heart and kidney disease, diabetes, cancer, weakened, immune systems due to disease or medication, and morbid obesity
- children with neurologic and neurodevelopmental conditions including seizure disorders and developmental delay
- residents of nursing and chronic care homes
- persons 65 years of age and older
- children under 5 years of age
- pregnant women
- Aboriginal peoples

How can I protect myself?

To avoid getting sick and spreading influenza to others:

- get the flu vaccine yearly from your family doctor, participating pharmacies, or the Health Department
- take the following precautions: wash your hands often, keep alcohol-based hand sanitizer handy, cover your coughs and sneezes, avoid touching your face, and stay home when you are sick

How does the vaccine work?

A new influenza vaccine is made each year to protect against strains of flu viruses that research indicates will be most common during the up-coming flu season. The vaccine stimulates your body's immune system to build antibodies against influenza, making it stronger and ready to fight off the illness before it starts. After vaccination, it takes about two weeks to build up these antibodies, and protection may last up to one year.

What kind of vaccine is available?

This season, several publicly-funded vaccines are available. Some injectable vaccines protect against three strains of influenza, while others protect against four strains. A nasal spray vaccine is also approved for use in Ontario (see the Flumist[®] fact sheet). However, each vaccine has specific age indications and not all vaccines are available for use at Health Department flu clinics.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes, and it is well tolerated. The flu injection may be given to persons starting at six months of age. Soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site lasting up to two days is common, but rarely interferes with normal activities. The vaccine cannot cause influenza illness. Life-threatening allergic reactions are very rare.

Oculorespiratory syndrome (ORS) was reported by a

small number of people who received the vaccine in 2000-2001. Symptoms included red eyes and respiratory symptoms that occurred within 24 hours of having received the vaccine. Persons who experienced ORS in the past may be safely re-immunized, but should first speak with their health care provider.

In less than one per million doses, flu vaccine has been associated with Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), a rare disease that causes muscle paralysis. Influenza infection itself has been associated with GBS; therefore flu vaccination may help protect against GBS.

Who should get the vaccine?

Vaccination is recommended for everyone six months of age and older. It is especially recommended for:

- those at high risk of complications of influenza
- those who may spread flu to those at high risk household contacts, healthcare workers, those caring for children under 5 years of age, those providing services in a closed setting to the high risk
- those who provide essential community services

Who should not get the vaccine?

The Health Department immunization clinics will not give the injectable vaccine to anyone who:

- has had severe allergic reaction (hives, throat, and/or tongue swelling, difficulty breathing or shock) to a past influenza vaccine
- has a severe allergy to any part of the vaccine *except eggs*
- has a new or worsening illness, with or without fever (however, if you have a cold or other minor illness, you can still be immunized)
- has had Guillain-Barré syndrome within six weeks of a past influenza vaccine
- has had ORS with respiratory symptoms
- plans to donate blood within the next 2 days
- has an unstable problem with their neurological system

If you fall into any of the above categories, you may need to speak with your physician, or return after an appropriate time interval.

How well does the vaccine protect against influenza?

Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent

influenza. You protect not only yourself, but you prevent spreading flu to those at greater risk of more severe complications from flu. Protection depends on the age and health of the person getting the vaccine and how well matched the flu strains are in the vaccine to those that are circulating. The vaccine is 50-60% effective in preventing influenza in healthy children and adults. In the elderly, the vaccine is about half as effective as it is in healthy adults. However, flu immunization has been shown to reduce pneumonia, hospitalization, and deaths in elderly persons.

When is the best time to get the vaccine?

Before influenza reaches the community (October to mid-November) is best. It can also be given when flu activity is present. The vaccine is recommended for travellers going to destinations where flu is likely to be circulating.

How many doses of vaccine do I need?

Adults should receive one dose of influenza vaccine every year. Children under nine years of age receiving the vaccine for the very first time should receive two doses given at least 4 weeks apart. They are then recommended to receive one dose per year thereafter.

When should I seek medical attention after receiving a vaccine?

We ask that you stay for at least 15 minutes after receiving your immunization. Contact your family doctor or go to the nearest emergency room right away if you have any of these symptoms within three days of getting the influenza vaccine: swelling of the lips, tongue or face, trouble breathing, hives, convulsions, dizziness, lasting or worsening weakness, high fever (40°C or 104°F), or other serious problems.

Who should I talk to if I have more questions?

If you have more questions, speak to your health care provider or call the Health Department.

For more information, please contact:

Halton Region

Dial 311 or 905-825-6000

Toll Free: 1-866-4HALTON (1-866-442-5866)

TTY: 905-827-9833

www.halton.ca/flu



