the FLU ends with u

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Seasonal Influenza (flu) Fact Sheet 2013-2014

What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza 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 does influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from infected persons through droplets from coughing and sneezing. You can also pick up the virus by touching surfaces that have been contaminated by an ill person—such as toys, doorknobs, utensils, or unwashed hands—and then touching your eyes, mouth, or nose. Washing hands is an important way to prevent illness!

Who is at high risk for influenza-related complications or hospitalization?

Most of us are at risk of infection with the influenza virus. However, some people are at greater risk of more severe complications:

- adults and children with certain chronic medical conditions including anemia, asthma, chronic lung disease, kidney, liver and weakened immune systems due to disease or medication
- residents of nursing and chronic care homes
- persons 65 years of age and older
- children under five years of age
- pregnant women
- morbidly obese persons
- Aboriginal peoples

How does the vaccine work?

A new influenza vaccine is made each year to protect against three strains of influenza viruses that research indicates are most likely to be circulating and to cause illness in the up-coming influenza 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. Once you have received the vaccine, it takes about two weeks to build up these antibodies, and protection may last up to one year.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes. It is well-tolerated and 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. Killed-virus influenza vaccine cannot give you influenza because it does not contain live virus. 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/or respiratory symptoms that occurred within 24 hours of having received the vaccine and resolved within 48 hours. Persons who experienced ORS in the past may be safely re-immunized, but should first speak with their health care provider.

In very rare cases the influenza vaccine has been associated with Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS). GBS is a very uncommon disease that causes muscle paralysis. About one case for every one million doses of vaccine given has been reported.

Who should get the vaccine?

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization, which advises the Public Health Agency of Canada, recommends the influenza vaccine for everyone six months of age and older. It is especially recommended for:

- those at high risk of complications of influenza

- those who may transmit influenza to those at high risk—healthcare workers, those caring for children under five 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 vaccine to anyone who:

- has had a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to eggs (hives, throat, and/or tongue swelling, difficulty breathing or shock). Such persons may still be considered safe to immunize and should speak with their physician.
- has had severe allergic reaction to a past influenza vaccine
- has a severe allergy to any part of the vaccine
- 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
- is under six months of age
- has an unstable problem with their neurological system
- plans to donate blood within the next 48 hours

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. It is important even if you are in good health. You protect not only yourself, but you prevent spreading influenza to those at greater risk of more severe complications from influenza. This includes newborns, pregnant women, elderly persons and people with weakened immune systems. Protection from the vaccine can vary. With a good match between the strains in the vaccine and those in circulation, the vaccine is 60-80% effective in preventing influenza in healthy children and adults. In the elderly, the vaccine is about half as effective as it is in healthy children and adults. However, even for these people, the vaccine may provide some protection. Studies have shown that influenza immunization reduces pneumonia, hospitalization, and deaths in these recipients.

When is the best time to get the vaccine?

Before influenza reaches the community (October to mid-November) is the best time. It can also be given when there is influenza activity. The vaccine is recommended for travellers going to destinations where influenza 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 seasonal influenza vaccine for the very first time should receive two doses given at least four weeks apart. They are then recommended to receive one dose per year thereafter.

When should I seek medical attention after receiving a vaccine?

As with other vaccines, 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)
- 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.

Your record of protection

After you get your immunization, your health care provider will give you a small form to keep with your immunization records. Tell your doctor the date you received the influenza vaccine.

For more information, please contact:

Halton Region
Dial 311 or 905-825-6000
Toll Free: 1-866-442-5866
www.halton.ca/flu

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