

November 2006

Influenza

What is the flu?

Influenza, the flu, is caused by a specific virus that typically comes around each fall or winter. People who get the flu usually have an abrupt onset of fever, muscle aches, headache, sore throat, cough, and weakness, usually lasting two to seven days. The cough and weakness can last for up to six weeks making physical activity and even day to day tasks difficult.

Who's at risk?

Everyone is at risk of getting the flu. Each year, on average, 25% of Canadians get the flu. Most people who get the flu will not get seriously ill. However, the elderly, very young children (less than two years of age), individuals with some underlying medical conditions (for example, chronic bronchitis, diabetes or chronic heart disease) and people who have trouble clearing their nose and throat of secretions due to weakness or underlying illness can become very ill from complications associated with getting the flu. The flu can also make it easier to become ill with other health problems such as pneumonia, or to worsen symptoms of heart and lung disease. Complications from influenza can sometimes lead to death, usually in those who are older and/or frail. Very infrequently it can cause Reye's syndrome, an illness in children that can affect the liver and kidneys.

How is the flu spread?

The flu spreads very easily from an infected person to others through coughing and sneezing. It is also spread by touching contaminated surfaces or objects such as unwashed hands, clothes, toys, eating utensils, surfaces (doorknobs, elevator buttons etc.) after someone with the flu has touched them.

What is the flu shot and what does it do?

The influenza vaccine (flu shot) is made from particles of killed flu viruses. It contains three different types of influenza viruses (two types of influenza A and one of influenza B). A person who receives the flu shot develops immunity for the types of flu in the vaccine. The body needs about two weeks to build up protection to the virus, and this protection may last four months or longer.

Why do I have to get the flu shot every year?

The influenza virus changes each year, so a different vaccine has to be used each year too. The protection from the vaccine wears off after about six months so people need a new shot every year. Doctors and scientists around the world determine the strains of influenza virus that are circulating, and the vaccine is then prepared to protect against the types that are most likely to occur each year.

When should I get the shot?

The best time to get your shot is between October and mid-November every fall. Since peak flu activity in Toronto usually occurs between December and March, getting your flu shot after November will still help protect you against the flu. Children under the age of nine who have never been vaccinated for the flu need two shots, one month apart, to get the best protection. The cost of the flu shot is covered by the government. After you receive any immunization, make sure the provider updates your personal immunization record, such as the "yellow card". Keep the card in a safe place.

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Can anyone get the flu shot?

Everyone six months of age or older, including breastfeeding and pregnant women, can get a shot. There are some exceptions:

- People who are allergic to eggs, thimerosal, neomycin or gelatin should **not** receive the vaccine.
- If you have had a reaction to a flu shot in the past, consult with your physician before getting this year's shot.
- Anyone with fever should wait until they are completely recovered before receiving their shot.
- Anyone with a history of Guillain-Barré Syndrome after receiving the flu shot should not receive a shot.

Is the flu shot safe?

The flu shot is very safe. People may have some pain at the spot where they got their needle that can last up to two days. Some people may get muscle aches, a low-grade fever or feel tired for a day or two after getting the shot. The vaccine cannot give you the flu because it does not contain live flu virus.

A small number of individuals experience runny, watery eyes, some mild throat swelling, cough, wheeze and chest tightness within a day of receiving the flu shot. All individuals with these symptoms recover completely, usually within 48 hours, and have no further adverse consequences but a small number can require hospitalization. If you experienced symptoms of red watery eyes, cough, sore throat, wheeze and chest tightness immediately after having the flu shot in the past you should tell your doctor before getting this year's flu shot or tell the nurse at the clinic when you get this year's shot. In very rare instances the influenza vaccine has been associated with a temporary neurological condition called Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS). GBS occurs at about one case per million doses of vaccine given.

Should I ever call my doctor after getting a shot?

If you experience any of the following symptoms after getting the flu shot you should seek immediate medical attention:

- hives
- swelling of the face, mouth or throat
- trouble breathing, hoarseness or wheezing
- paleness, weakness, a fast heartbeat or dizziness
- watery, runny, red eyes
- chest tightness
- any other unusual condition or serious reaction to the vaccine

If you experience watery, red eyes and chest tightness after having the flu shot please contact your Public Health office. In Toronto, residents can call 416-392-1250.

What if I get the flu anyway?

Go to bed and get plenty of rest. Drink lots of water and juice. Stay away from children, elderly people or anyone with a serious illness, so they don't catch the flu from you. Ask your doctor about medication to reduce aches, pain and fever (e.g. acetaminophen or ibuprofen). If caught early, your doctor may be able to prescribe some anti-influenza drugs that may ease your discomfort and shorten the length of your illness. If you have trouble breathing or start to cough up thick yellow sputum, you should also see a doctor. Although antibiotics don't help influenza itself, sometimes doctors prescribe antibiotics for complications of flu such as pneumonia.