

Facts About Seasonal Influenza for Adults

What is influenza?

Seasonal influenza (flu) is a contagious viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs that usually occurs in the fall and 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 occasionally, but usually in limited areas. Influenza is thought to be spread 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, each year between 5 percent and 20 percent of the population contract influenza, more than 200,000 are hospitalized, and 36,000 die from seasonal influenza-related complications annually.

This flu season could be worse. There is a new and very different flu virus spreading worldwide among people called [novel H1N1 flu](#). This virus may cause more illness or more severe illness than usual. Vaccines are the best tool we have to prevent influenza; however, the seasonal flu vaccine is unlikely to provide protection against novel H1N1 influenza. However **a novel H1N1 vaccine is currently in production and may be ready for the public in the fall**. The novel H1N1 vaccine is not intended to replace the seasonal flu vaccine – it is intended to be used along-side seasonal flu vaccine.

Symptoms

Typical seasonal 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. However, persons with mild symptoms such as cough and mild fever can also have an infection with influenza virus, and symptoms can be similar to those caused by other respiratory viruses. Persons with mild symptoms can still transmit influenza virus to others, including to persons at risk for more severe influenza virus infections.

Prevention

Getting a seasonal flu vaccine is the best way to prevent influenza. The time to vaccinate is as soon as vaccine is available and throughout the influenza season. Because the flu vaccine is updated every year to keep up with changes in circulating flu viruses and because immunity to influenza viruses declines within a year after vaccination, it is important to get vaccinated against influenza every year.

Who should get seasonal influenza vaccine?

Summary of seasonal influenza vaccination recommendations for adults

Annual vaccination against seasonal influenza is recommended for any adult who wants to reduce the risk for becoming ill with influenza or of transmitting it to others. Vaccination also is recommended for all adults in the following groups, because these persons are either at high risk for influenza complications, or are close contacts of persons at high risk:

- Persons 50 years of age or older;
- Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season;
- Persons who have chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, hematological or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus);
- Persons who have immunosuppression (including immunosuppression caused by medications or by human immunodeficiency virus);
- Persons 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;
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities;
- Health care personnel;
- Household contacts and caregivers of children younger than 5 years of age and adults 50 years of age and older, with particular emphasis on vaccinating contacts of children younger than 6 months of age; and,
- Household contacts and caregivers of persons with medical conditions that put them at high risk for severe complications from influenza.

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Summary of seasonal influenza vaccination recommendations for children and adolescents aged 6 months – 18 years

Vaccination of all children aged 6 months – 18 years is recommended for the 2009-10 influenza season. Children and adolescents at high risk for influenza complications should continue to be a focus of vaccination efforts as providers and programs transition to routinely vaccinating all children and adolescents.

Children and adolescents at higher risk for influenza complications are those:

- Aged 6 months up to their 5th birthday
- Who have chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, hematological or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus);
- Who are immunosuppressed (including immunosuppression caused by medications or by human immunodeficiency virus)
- 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;
- Who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy, who therefore, might be at risk for experiencing Reye syndrome after influenza virus infection;
- Who are residents of chronic-care facilities; and,
- Who will be pregnant during the influenza season.

Children and adolescents who are household contacts of any of the high risk groups above are also recommended for annual vaccination.

Note: Children younger than 6 months of age are the pediatric group at highest risk of seasonal influenza complications, yet they are too young to receive the influenza vaccine. The best way to protect these children is to vaccinate their close contacts, including siblings and out of home care givers, against seasonal influenza.

Vaccine Safety

Two different types of seasonal influenza vaccine are available.

Injected vaccine

The injected influenza vaccine can be given to persons 6 months of age 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 to 2 days. Other possible mild side effects include a headache and low-grade fever for a day after vaccination.

Intranasal vaccine

The intranasal vaccine can be given to healthy persons 2 to 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 persons. There may be a runny nose, headache, low-grade fever, sore throat, fatigue or cough after vaccination

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Two different types of seasonal influenza vaccine are available: injectable inactivated influenza vaccine (TIV) and live attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV) administered as a nasal spray. TIV is recommended for use by people 6 months of age and older with or without chronic medical conditions. LAIV is recommended for healthy people 2 to 49 years of age. Recommendations for the use of both vaccines are posted on the Web site of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/ACIP-list.htm>.

- FACT:** Influenza can be prevented with safe, effective vaccines.
- FACT:** To protect infants younger than 6 months of age from influenza and its complications, adults, other household members, and out-of-home caregivers of these children should be vaccinated.
- FACT:** Each year, on average, 36,000 people in the United States die from seasonal influenza complications, including an average of about 100 deaths each year in children younger than 5 years of age. Greater than 90% of deaths occur in persons 65 years of age and older.
- FACT:** During the 1990's, an average of more than 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 seasonal influenza vaccine is paid for by Medicare Part B.
- FACT:** Because influenza viruses can change from year to year and because protection from the vaccine does not last more than one year, annual influenza vaccination is necessary.
- FACT:** Influenza vaccine does not protect against 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.
- FACT:** In most influenza seasons, 5-20% of the U.S. population will be infected with seasonal influenza virus. These infections typically cause the infected person to miss work or school, or be ill while on vacation.
- FACT:** Anyone who wants to avoid becoming ill with influenza or transmitting it to others should get vaccinated.
- FACT:** Most persons who are recommended for vaccination do not get vaccinated.