

What is Influenza?

Influenza (commonly known as “the flu”) is a serious, acute respiratory infection that is caused by a virus. People who get influenza have fever, chills, cough, runny eyes, stuffy nose, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, extreme weakness and fatigue. Illness due to influenza usually lasts 2–7 days and sometimes longer in the elderly and in people with chronic conditions. The cough and fatigue can persist for several weeks, making the return to full activity difficult.

People of any age can get the flu. Most people who get the flu are ill for only a few days. However, some people can become very ill, and need to go to an emergency room or to the doctor’s office. Flu spreads through respiratory droplets from infected persons when they cough and sneeze. It is also spread through direct contact with surfaces contaminated by the influenza virus, such as toys, eating utensils, and unwashed hands.

How well does the yearly influenza vaccine protect against the flu?

When there is a good match between the influenza strains in the vaccine and the influenza strains circulating in the community, the vaccine can prevent influenza illness in 50–80 per cent of healthy children and adults. Studies have shown that getting the flu vaccine decreases the incidence of pneumonia, hospital admission and deaths in the elderly. Physician visits, hospitalization and death in high-risk persons under 65 years of age are also reduced.

It takes your immune system about two weeks after receiving the flu shot to develop protection against influenza virus. People who receive the vaccine can still get the flu, but if they do, it is usually milder. Having the flu vaccine will not protect you against colds and other respiratory illnesses which are not caused by the influenza virus, but may be mistaken for the flu.

The influenza vaccine is needed every year because the virus changes often and there may be new strains circulating that year. Also your immunity to the influenza virus decreases six months to one year after receiving the vaccine.

Who can get the influenza vaccine?

Anyone aged six months and older who lives, works or attends school in Ontario is eligible to receive the publicly funded influenza vaccine.

Children from six months to nine years of age require two doses of influenza vaccine (given at least one month apart) if they are being vaccinated against influenza for the first time, and only one dose every year after that.

Why should healthy adults and children get the flu vaccine?

Influenza is much worse than a cold. Even healthy, young people can become quite ill. Anyone could bring the influenza virus home to a baby, older relative, or someone with a medical condition who could develop serious complications from influenza.

To avoid missing quality time with their families, losing time from work, and passing influenza to more vulnerable loved ones, healthy people should get vaccinated.

Children can also benefit from influenza immunization. Influenza in preschoolers is associated with acute middle ear infections. Influenza may also lead to hospitalization in healthy children (particularly those under two years of age), as well as in children with underlying high-risk medical conditions. Children are also frequent spreaders of the virus, both at school and home. Influenza immunization can decrease the incidence of middle ear infections associated with influenza, reduce school absenteeism and prevent the spread of influenza in the community.

Who should not get the influenza vaccine?

The following individuals **should not** get the influenza vaccine:

- Infants under six months of age.
- Anyone who has a known allergy or is sensitive to any component of the vaccine.
- Anyone who had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of influenza vaccine.
- Anyone who developed Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) within six weeks of a previous influenza immunization should avoid influenza immunization in the future. It is not known whether the influenza vaccine causes an increased risk of GBS in persons who previously developed GBS for any reason. Anyone with a history of GBS should consult their physician before getting the vaccine.

Note:

For people who are allergic to eggs: The national expert body for immunizations in Canada (NACI) states that most individuals with egg allergies can be safely immunized with influenza vaccine. However, Region of Waterloo does not vaccinate these individuals at Public Health run immunization clinics. Individuals who are allergic to eggs should consult their family physician about receiving the influenza vaccine.

The following individuals **should delay** getting the influenza vaccine:

- Anyone with a moderate to severe acute illness with fever, or has just started taking medication (e.g., antibiotics) should wait until they feel better before being immunized.
- Individuals with a changing neurological disorder.

What are the risks from influenza vaccine?

The influenza vaccine, like any medicine, can cause either mild or rarely severe side effects. The risk of the vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small.

Most people who get the vaccine have either no side effects or mild side effects such as soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site. Life-threatening anaphylactic reactions are very rare. If they do occur, it is within a few minutes to a few hours after receiving the vaccine. If this type of reaction occurs, seek medical attention right away.

When should I call my doctor?

You should seek medical attention if you believe that you, or someone in your care, have had an unexpected or serious reaction to a vaccine. Any reaction to a vaccine should be reported to your health care provider who will report these occurrences to your local public health unit.

Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or contact Public Health at 519-575-4400.

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Region of Waterloo Public Health

Infectious Diseases, Dental and Sexual Health