

FLU

A seasonal concern
that can pack a
serious punch.



- The history of influenza is a dramatic one. The Spanish Flu of 1918-19 killed at least 21 million people worldwide (30,000 in Canada alone) – more people than all the wars of the 20th century! The ability of the flu virus to mutate and change each year makes the threat of deadly epidemics a constant concern.
- Influenza is both a personal health concern and a public health issue. Several days of school or work are missed each year when a person becomes sick with the flu. Complications due to the flu, especially in the elderly and the very young, take a toll on our health care system.
- Fortunately, modern vaccinations can have a significant effect on decreasing influenza infections. A dead virus is used in traditional vaccines while live, but weakened, virus is used in the newer nasal mist. Neither form is capable of causing the flu, although some mild flu-like symptoms may be experienced for 1-2 days. This is generally regarded as the response of a healthy immune system. In fact, vaccinations actually stimulate the immune system – causing the body to form antibodies, protection against the virus.

What is the flu and how do we get it?

Influenza (flu) is a highly contagious viral infection that infects thousands of people worldwide every year. The elderly are most impacted since many of them have other medical conditions making them more susceptible to the virus. Immunization against the flu is available each year and is recommended for many specific groups of people.

HOW IS FLU SPREAD? The main method of transmission is through airborne droplets, direct human contact (shaking hands), and through contact with contaminated objects.

The flu virus can survive on a telephone, countertop or doorknobs for 24 to 48 hours, on paper tissues and clothing for 8 to 10 hours and on skin and hands for up to 5 minutes. It doesn't take long for the virus to infect. A simple act of shaking hands with someone already infected, a quick scratch of your nose with your finger and you may have infected yourself with the flu virus. The main message here is: *wash your hands often throughout the day and keep your hands away from your nose and mouth.*

DOES FLU VACCINE WORK? This question is debated each fall. The flu virus is constantly changing and each year several new strains are present. Researchers develop new vaccines based on the most current strains of the virus. Even if the vaccine content is not perfect, it will still provide some protection. It is certainly better than no vaccine at all.

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MYTHS ABOUT THE FLU SHOT:

• *“I will get the flu”*

The flu virus in the vaccine is a killed virus. Its job is to stimulate the production of antibodies against a future flu infection. It can not give you the flu.

• *“I hear the side effects are worse than the flu”*

The main side effects (if any occur at all) are mild soreness and redness at the site of injection. There may be a bit of swelling at the site and rarely, aches and fever. (This is NOT the flu.) The minor discomfort at the injection site will disappear within a day or so.

• *“I’ve heard the vaccine contains mercury?”*

Some forms of flu vaccine (multidose vials) contain thimerosal, a preservative that contains mercury, but is added at an extremely low concentration of about 1 millionth of a gram per dose. Single-dose vaccine units have none. In the past, there were concerns about vaccinations and the development of autism in children, however, these concerns have never been proven. In fact, recently, the study that sparked them was retracted due to poor methodology and conflict of interest.

• *“The flu isn’t that serious”*

The flu can put the elderly and young children in hospital. People can die from it.

• *“It’s too late to get my shot in December”*

Getting your shot in December or even later is fine.

• *“I got my flu shot last year”*

Flu types change each year and so does the vaccine. You need a new shot each year.

WHO SHOULD RECEIVE THE FLU SHOT?

Immunization against the flu is available each year in the Fall. The flu shot is offered free to people who are at increased risk of complications, or who come in regular contact with those groups. Listed below are a few examples of some of the groups of people who may qualify for a free flu shot:

- People 65 years and older and their caregivers.
- Children and adults with chronic health conditions and their household contacts.
- Healthcare workers and emergency responders.
- Healthy children from 6 month to less than 5 years of age.
- Household contacts and caregivers of children from birth to less than 5 years old.
- Pregnant women who will be in their 3rd trimester during the flu season.
- Residents of nursing home and other chronic care facilities.
- Many other groups are also eligible for free flu shots - talk to your pharmacist to see whether or not you qualify.

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WHO SHOULD NOT RECEIVE THE FLU SHOT?

Anyone suffering from a fever should wait until the fever subsides before getting the flu shot. People with severe egg allergies or individuals who have had a severe reaction to the flu shot in the past should not receive the flu vaccine. Recent research has shown that some people who have a mild egg allergy may be able to tolerate the flu vaccine, however the vaccine should only be given by a healthcare provider who is familiar with egg allergy reactions and the individual must be monitored for at least 30 minutes after receiving the vaccine.

TIMING OF YOUR FLU SHOT

Mid-October and November are good times to receive the flu shot. Full protection starts two weeks after the flu shot and lasts for about six months in the elderly and longer in healthy people. You will get a better immune response from your flu shot if you get a good night’s sleep the night before.

Important: If you do happen to get the flu, stay home. Because of the virus’ great ability to spread, you risk infecting others.

IS IT A COLD OR THE FLU?

Symptom	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	Usually high fever 38°- 40°C. Sudden onset lasts 2-4 days
Headache	Rare	Usual, can be severe
General aches and pains	Sometimes, mild	Usual, often severe
Fatigue and weakness	Sometimes, mild	Usual, severe, may last 2-3 weeks or more
Extreme fatigue	Unusual	Usual, early onset, can be severe
Runny stuffy nose	Common	Common
Sneezing	Common	Common
Sore throat	Common	Common
Chest discomfort, coughing	Sometimes, mild to moderate	Usual, can be severe
Complications	Can lead to sinus congestion or earache	Can lead to pneumonia and respiratory failure, can worsen a current chronic condition, can be life threatening

SUMMARY:

Influenza is a serious illness for some people - and deadly for others. Your best bet for avoiding it and reducing its spread is vaccination and good hygiene.