

What You Should Know About Influenza and Influenza Vaccine

What is the flu and what are the risks?

The flu is a serious, acute respiratory disease that is caused by a virus. People who get flu have a cough, fever, chills, sore throat, muscle aches, and fatigue. Symptoms usually last from three to five days but can last longer. The cough and fatigue can last several weeks, making return to personal and work activities difficult.

People of all ages can get the flu. Most people are ill for only a few days, but some people get much sicker and need to see their doctor or go to the emergency department of a hospital. Complications of the flu can include pneumonia, requiring hospitalization, and even death. These complications are most common in the elderly, the very young, and those with chronic medical conditions.

The flu spreads easily through coughing and sneezing. It can also be spread by touching contaminated surfaces, unwashed hands, or objects such as toys and eating utensils.

Who should get the flu shot?

Everyone can benefit from the flu shot. People who are at risk for complications or those who are capable of infecting high-risk groups (e.g. health care workers and members of their household) should receive the vaccine.

The vaccine is 70 to 90 percent effective in preventing flu in healthy adults. In children, it is 77 to 91 percent effective in preventing the flu. In the elderly, the vaccine helps to prevent pneumonia and hospitalization in six out of ten people and prevents death in eight out of ten people. Babies less than one year of age are at the same risk for complications as the elderly.

Individuals who should not get the flu shot include:

- infants less than six months of age,
- anyone with a serious allergy to eggs, Thimerosal or Neomycin (preservatives found in the flu shot),
- anyone who developed Guillian-Barre Syndrome within six to eight weeks of a previous flu shot,
- anyone who developed oculorespiratory syndrome (ORS) last year should discuss this with the nurse, or
- anyone acutely ill with a fever.

What are the possible side effects of the flu shot?

- Most people have no side effects or some soreness, redness and swelling at the needle site.

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- A few people may get a fever or muscle aches shortly after getting the flu shot and this can last for one to two days.
- Life-threatening allergic reactions are rare.

The people at high risk for flu related complications include:

- healthy children from 6 to 23 months of age,
- adults and children with chronic cardiac or pulmonary disorders,
- people of any age who are residents of nursing homes and other chronic care facilities,
- people over 65 years of age,
- adults and children with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes mellitus and other metabolic diseases, cancer, immunodeficiency, immunosuppression (due to underlying disease and/or therapy) renal disease, anemia, and hemoglobinopathy,
- children and adolescents (6 months to 18 years of age) with conditions treated for long periods of time with acetylsalicylic acid (ASA),
- people at high risk of flu complications embarking on travel to destinations where the flu is likely to be circulating, and
- pregnant and lactating women and chronic conditions such as those mentioned above.

The people capable of transmitting the flu to those at high risk for flu-related complications include:

- health care workers and other personnel who have significant contact with people in high-risk groups previously described,
- household contacts (including children) of people at high risk who either cannot be vaccinated, or may respond inadequately to vaccination,
- people who provide essential community services, e.g., police and fire personnel, public utility, city workers, and emergency service workers,
- contacts of children 6 to 23 months of age,
- practicing home care workers and support staff in community and health care settings with direct and direct contact,
- student home care workers and support staff in a clinical setting,
- volunteers and staff in hospitals, nursing homes, homes for the aged, chronic care facilities, chronic care units, and retirement homes,
- home care workers and volunteers,
- those providing services to those at high risk within closed or relatively closed settings (e.g., cruise ship),
- pregnant women in their third trimester, and
- people in direct contact with live poultry and/or involved in the slaughtering process.

Can influenza vaccine cause the flu?

No. The vaccine does not contain live virus so you cannot get the virus from the vaccine. However, the vaccine will not protect you from colds and other respiratory illness that may be mistaken for influenza.

When should I call my doctor?

You should call your doctor if you develop any of these symptoms within three days after receiving the vaccine:

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