

Facts About Influenza For Adults

What is influenza?

Influenza (flu), is a highly contagious viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs that is one of the most severe illnesses of the winter season. Influenza is spread easily from person to person, primarily when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Influenza may lead to hospitalization or even death, especially among the elderly. About 10% to 20% of the population contract influenza annually.

Prevention*

There is a vaccine to protect against influenza; it is usually given in the fall (September through December) so that protection is conferred for the entire flu "season" (December through March). Because the influenza virus changes from year to year, it is important to get vaccinated with a new flu vaccine every year.

Symptoms

Typical influenza illness is characterized by the abrupt onset of high fever, chills, a dry cough, headache, runny nose, sore throat, and muscle and joint pain. Unlike other common respiratory infections which are often called "the flu," influenza can cause extreme fatigue lasting several days to weeks.

Who should get influenza vaccine?

- People 65 years of age or older.
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities.
- Adults and adolescents with chronic pulmonary or cardiovascular disorders, including asthma.
- Health care workers, care givers and others who might transmit influenza virus to persons at high-risk for complications from infection.
- People who are less able to fight infections because of a disease they are born with, infection with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), treatment with medications such as long-term steroids, and/or treatment for cancer with X-rays or medications.
- Adults and adolescents who required regular medical follow-up or hospitalization during the preceding year because of chronic illnesses (including diabetes mellitus), kidney diseases, and blood cell diseases such as sickle cell anemia.
- Women who will be in the second or third trimester of pregnancy during the flu season (December - March).
- Persons 6 months to 18 years of age who receive long-term aspirin therapy and therefore might be at risk for developing Reye syndrome after influenza.

Vaccine Safety

The influenza vaccine is very safe and effective and generally has few side effects. You cannot get influenza from the vaccine. There may be some soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site. Other possible mild side effects include a headache and low-grade fever for a day after vaccination. As with any medicine, there are very small risks that serious problems could occur after getting a vaccine. However, the potential risks associated with influenza illness are much greater than the potential risks associated with the influenza vaccine.

* For the 2002-2003 flu season, high-risk individuals (e.g. the elderly, institutionalized, and people with chronic diseases) and health care workers should be immunized in October, all others should be immunized in November and December, or later.

FACT: Influenza can be prevented with a safe, effective vaccine.

FACT: You cannot get influenza from the vaccine.

FACT: Influenza vaccine is fully paid for by Medicare Part B if the health care provider accepts the Medicare-approved payment amount.

FACT: Pneumonia and influenza together are the seventh leading cause of death in the United States, and the fifth leading cause of death among adults 65 years of age and older.

FACT: For 23 influenza epidemics recorded between 1972 and 1995, 20,000 excess deaths occurred in each of 11 epidemics, and 40,000 deaths in each of 6 epidemics.

FACT: Each year since 1969 an average of 114,000 people are hospitalized for influenza-related complications. This number climbs markedly during severe flu seasons.

FACT: Influenza vaccine can prevent up to 50% to 60% of hospitalizations and 80% of deaths from influenza-related complications among the elderly.

FACT: The annual direct medical costs (hospitalization, doctors office visits, medications, etc.) of influenza are estimated at up to \$4.6 billion. Total direct and indirect costs (work days lost, school days lost, etc.) of a severe flu epidemic are at least \$12 billion.

FACT: The 1918 Spanish flu outbreak killed more than 500,000 people in the United States and more than 20 million worldwide. The 1968-69 "Hong Kong flu" outbreak led to more than 34,000 deaths in the United States.

FACT: Since influenza viruses can change from year to year, an annual influenza shot is necessary each fall.

FACT: Influenza vaccine will not protect you from other respiratory infections, such as colds and bronchitis, commonly referred to as "flu."

FACT: Influenza can worsen chronic heart disease, lung disease and diabetes, and can lead to bacterial or viral pneumonia. It can also lead to hospitalization and death, especially among the elderly.

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