

Influenza Vaccine Fact Sheet

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

1. What is influenza?

Influenza (commonly known as “the flu”) is a serious, acute respiratory illness that is caused by a virus. People who get influenza may have a fever, chills, cough, runny eyes, stuffy nose, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, extreme weakness and fatigue. Note: the elderly may not have a fever. Children can also have earaches, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

People of any age can get influenza. Illness due to influenza usually lasts two to seven days; sometimes longer in the elderly and in people with chronic diseases. Most people who get influenza are ill for only a few days. However, the cough and fatigue can persist for several weeks, making the return to full activity, difficult. Some people can become very ill, possibly developing complications and requiring hospitalization.

Influenza spreads through respiratory droplets from infected persons, for example, through coughing or sneezing. It is also spread through direct contact with surfaces contaminated by the influenza virus, such as toys, eating utensils and unwashed hands.

2. How well does the vaccine protect against influenza?

Influenza immunization strengthens your body by stimulating your immune system to build up antibodies against the virus, making it stronger so that it is ready to fight the influenza illness before it starts.

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 about 60% to 80% in healthy children and adults. Studies have shown that influenza immunization decreases the incidence of pneumonia, hospital admission and death in the elderly.

According to the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) physician visits, hospitalization and death in high-risk persons under 65 years of age are also reduced.

It takes about two weeks following immunization to develop protection against influenza; protection may last up to one year. People who receive the vaccine can still get influenza but if they do, it is usually milder. However, the vaccine will not protect against colds and other respiratory illnesses that may be mistaken for influenza, but are not caused by the influenza virus.

3. Can the vaccine cause influenza?

No, the publicly funded influenza vaccine does not contain the live virus so you cannot get influenza from the vaccine.

4. When should the vaccine be given?

Influenza vaccine should be offered as soon as it becomes available at doctors' offices, participating pharmacies and at local public health and other community-based influenza immunization clinics. It is preferable to receive influenza vaccine prior to the onset of the influenza season, if possible.

5. Who can get the vaccine?

Anyone aged 6 months and older who lives, works or attends school in Ontario is eligible to receive the publicly funded influenza vaccine.

6. Why is it important for children under five years of age to get the vaccine?

Many people understand that the elderly are at high risk of serious illness or even death as a result of influenza, but what they may not realize is that young children, age 5 and under, are also considered a high risk group, similar to seniors.

7. Do I need to get the influenza vaccine every year?

Yes, the influenza vaccine is needed each year. The influenza virus changes often, so it is necessary to get immunized with influenza vaccine every year for protection from the new virus strains that may be circulating that year.

8. How many doses of influenza vaccine do I need?

Adults: All individuals older than 9 years of age require one (1) dose of influenza vaccine annually.

Children 9 years and older: Children 9 years of age and older require one (1) dose.

Children under 9 years of age:

Children Previously Not immunized

- **6 months to 8 years old**, previously *not* immunized, require two (2) doses at least 4 weeks apart.

Previously Immunized Children

- **6 months to 8 years old**, previously immunized with influenza vaccine require one (1) dose.

9. Can the influenza vaccine be given at the same time as other vaccines?

The publicly funded influenza vaccine may be given at the same time as other vaccines. If given at the same time, it is recommended that two different injection sites be used. Different administration sets (needle and syringe) must be used.

10. Do I have to pay for my influenza immunization?

No, influenza vaccine is available free of charge to individuals who live, work or attend school in Ontario. The influenza vaccine will be available through doctors' offices and through community-based influenza immunization clinics which may be offered by pharmacies, public health units, community health centres (CHCs), community care access centres (CCACs), public hospitals and long-term care homes (LTCHs), as well as employer-sponsored workplace clinics.

11. How can I keep track of my influenza immunizations and other immunizations?

After you receive your immunization, you should ask for a written record of your immunization from the health care provider who administered your shot. Keep it in a safe place!

12. Who should not get the vaccine?

The following persons should not get the publicly funded influenza vaccine:

- Infants under six months of age (the current vaccine is not recommended for this age group).
- Anyone who has a known allergy or hypersensitivity to any component of the vaccine. Your health care provider can tell you which components are in the specific vaccine.
- Anyone who had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the influenza vaccine.
- It is not known whether the influenza vaccine causes an increased risk of recurrent Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) in persons who previously had GBS. Anyone who has previously developed GBS within the first 6 weeks following an influenza immunization should avoid influenza immunization in the future.

The influenza vaccine should be temporarily delayed in the following persons:

- Anyone with a moderate to severe acute illness with fever or just started on medication (e.g., antibiotics) should usually wait until the symptoms subside before being immunized.
- However, people with a minor illness with or without a fever (e.g., a cold) could still get the influenza vaccine.
- Immunization should generally be delayed in individuals with an evolving neurologic disorder until the disease process has been stabilized.

13. What are the risks from the vaccine?

Influenza vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing side effects, which can be either mild or, occasionally, severe. 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 medical attention should be sought immediately.

Guillain-Barré Syndrome (or GBS)

GBS is a very uncommon disease that causes muscle paralysis and has been associated with certain infectious diseases (e.g. *Campylobacter* bacteria). Overall, the risk of GBS occurring in association with immunization is small. In comparison to the small risk of GBS, the risk of illness and death associated with influenza is much greater. In fact, influenza infection itself can cause GBS, and at least one study has found that influenza vaccination reduces the overall risk of GBS.

Oculorespiratory Syndrome (ORS)

During the 2000-2001 influenza season, “Oculo-Respiratory Syndrome” (ORS) was reported after administration of the influenza vaccine in some individuals. Symptoms include redness in both eyes that are not itchy, and/or swelling of the face, and/or respiratory symptoms (cough, wheeze, chest tightness, difficulty breathing, difficulty swallowing, hoarseness or sore throat) occurring within 24 hours of influenza immunization. Since the 2000-2001 influenza season, fewer cases of ORS have been reported.

Persons who experienced ORS symptoms in the past may be safely re-immunized with influenza vaccine except for those who have experienced ORS with severe lower respiratory symptoms (wheeze, chest tightness, difficulty breathing) within 24 hours of influenza immunization. These individuals should seek expert medical advice before being immunized again with influenza vaccine.

14. When should I seek medical attention after immunization with the publicly funded influenza vaccine?

You should seek medical attention if you believe that you or someone in your care has had a 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.

15. Who should I talk to if I have any questions about the influenza or any other vaccines?

If you are looking for general information about influenza, the influenza vaccine, the province's Universal Influenza Immunization Program (UIIP) or the location of a clinic near you, please call: 1-877-844-1944 (TTY#1-800-387-5559) or visit website: www.ontario.ca/flu. If you have questions about the vaccine that are specific to your medical condition, you should ask your health care provider or call your local public health unit

For additional information on influenza, please visit the following websites or call your local public health unit:

- a) Universal Influenza Immunization Program: www.ontario.ca/flu
- b) Public Health Agency of Canada site: National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) Statement on Seasonal Trivalent Inactivated Influenza Vaccine for 2010/2011: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/naci-ccni/#rec>
- c) *Immunize Canada* previously known as Canadian Coalition for Influenza Immunization Awareness and Promotion: www.immunize.cpha.ca
- d) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): Seasonal Influenza: www.cdc.gov/flu
- e) Dielman J, et al. *BJM* 2011;343:1-13.
- f) Sivadon-Tardy V, et al. *Clin Infect Dis* 2009;48:48-56.

ServiceOntario, INFOLine: 1-877-234-4343 toll free in Ontario (TTY: 1-800-387-5559)

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000 (TTY: 1-866-797-0007)

Version française disponible en communiquant avec le 1 877 234-4343 ATS: 1 800 387-5559 (web site: <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/fr/ccom/flu/>)