

PROTECTING ONTARIANS AGAINST THE FLU: FACT VERSUS MYTH

Ontario's Universal Influenza Immunization Program, the only one of its kind in North America, helps people protect themselves and those around them from the flu.

Getting a flu shot is important. Without it, people increase their risk of infection, serious illness or even death. In Ontario, up to 29,000 individuals are hospitalized each year due to the flu and pneumonia and approximately 1,500 people die. In addition, influenza and pneumonia costs the health care system up to \$195 million annually.

Myths about the flu shot prevent some people from getting vaccinated. Here are the facts:

Myth #1: I didn't get a flu shot last year and I didn't get sick, so I don't need one this year.

Fact: Even though you have avoided getting the flu so far, you could still get sick this year. Every year, different strains of the flu virus circulate. Avoiding the shot increases your chances of becoming ill.

Myth #2: I'm young and healthy. I don't need a flu shot.

Fact: Even healthy children and young adults can become seriously ill. On average, the flu can leave you ill for up to seven days, causing lost time from work, school or vacation. Plus, there's a chance you might infect others who are at much greater risk than you of becoming seriously ill, such as young children, the elderly or someone with a medical condition.

Myth #3: Getting a flu shot will give me the flu.

Fact: This is simply not true. The vaccine does not contain live virus. Many people confuse the flu with a cold or other respiratory infections, which the flu vaccine will not protect you from.

Myth #4: Flu shots aren't worth getting because they're not very effective.

Fact: When the vaccine is a good match to the circulating strains, the flu shot is up to 90 per cent effective in preventing flu in healthy adults, and up to 80 per cent effective in children. In the elderly, the flu shot prevents complications such as pneumonia and hospitalization in about six out of every 10 people, and can prevent death in more than eight out of every 10 people. Vaccine effectiveness varies from person to person, depending on their general state of health. Some people who get a flu shot can still get the flu. But if they do, it is usually a milder case than it would have been without the shot.

Myth #5: I don't need another flu shot. I got one last year.

Fact: A flu shot is needed every year. Influenza viruses change constantly, and each year, a new vaccine is produced that provides protection against the three most common strains predicted for the coming season. Protection provided by the vaccine takes about two weeks to develop after the flu shot, and may last up to one year.