

## Influenza (Flu) Immunization Programs in BC

### What is influenza?

Influenza, often called the 'flu', is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by a virus. Symptoms of influenza that occur throughout the body are due to the immune response to infection, but the virus usually stays in the airways. Influenza symptoms can include fever, headache, muscle pain, runny nose, sore throat, extreme tiredness, and cough. Although colds and other viruses may cause similar symptoms, symptoms due to the influenza virus tend to be worse.

Symptoms can begin about one to four days, with an average of two days, after a person is first exposed to the influenza virus. Fever and other body symptoms can usually last seven to 10 days, with the cough and weakness lasting possibly up to one to two weeks more.

### How can influenza be prevented?

An influenza shot, also known as a flu shot, can help prevent you from getting sick with influenza or from spreading it to others. That's why it is important for children, adults, and seniors, especially those with ongoing health concerns, to protect themselves against this winter illness. It is also important for health care providers to be immunized to protect the high risk people that they care for or live with.

**NOTE: Influenza vaccine only helps the body build immunity to the viruses that cause influenza. The vaccine does not protect against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses, often called 'stomach flu'.**

In BC the vaccine will be available starting in early November. It is best to get the influenza vaccine by the end of November to give the body enough time - about two weeks - to build up immunity before the influenza season starts. Influenza season is usually between December and March. The vaccine can however offer protection if given at any time during the influenza season.

**In BC the influenza vaccine is recommended and provided free to children and adults who are at high risk for severe illness or death due to infection with influenza, including:**

### Seniors:

- All people 65 years of age and older. For more information, see BC HealthFile [#12a Why Seniors Should Get Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccinations](#).

### Children and adults:

- Children six to 23 months of age.
- Children and adults with ongoing heart or lung disorders (including asthma, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, and Cystic Fibrosis) that requires regular medical care.
- Children and adults with kidney disease, diabetes, cancer, anemia, or immune system disorders.
- Children and adults with a health concern that makes it hard for them to breathe, or to get rid of fluids in their throat and lungs, or makes them choke on food or drinks that can then enter their lungs. People with these kinds of health concerns include persons with spinal cord injury, seizure disorders, and/or neuromuscular disorders.
- Children and teenagers being treated with acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) for long periods of time.
- Household contacts and caregivers of children 0-23 months of age.
- Healthy children and adults living in the same house as people at high risk, because some people at high risk don't respond well to vaccine or cannot be vaccinated.
- People of any age living in residential care, assisted living or other group facilities.
- Pregnant women who may deliver their baby during the influenza season because they will become household contacts of their newborn baby. Newborns are at higher risk from influenza but do not respond well to the influenza shot themselves.
- People who work with live poultry and swine.
- Correctional officers and inmates of Provincial Correctional Facilities.

### Health care workers/emergency responders:

- It is important for health care providers, staff and volunteers, who have contact with people at high

risk of influenza to get a shot. This includes police, firefighters, ambulance attendants, corrections officers, independent health care practitioners and their staff, as well as daycare staff where children ages 0-23 months may attend.

## What are the possible side effects?

The influenza vaccine is very safe. It **cannot** give you influenza, as it contains dead influenza viruses that cannot cause infection. Most people have no symptoms after their influenza shot. Some may have redness or soreness for one or two days at the area where the needle was given. Mild influenza-like symptoms may occur in some people, especially those being vaccinated for the first time. Symptoms can include mild fever, headache and aching muscles starting within six to 12 hours but ending within 24 to 48 hours. These are much less severe and don't last as long as influenza infection.

With any vaccine or drug, there is a very rare possibility of a shock-like allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. This can include hives, wheezy breathing, or swelling of some part of the body. If this happens, particularly swelling around the throat or sudden and severe difficulty breathing, immediately call 911 or the emergency phone number listed in the local phone book.

**Report any serious or unexpected reactions to your local public health nurse or family doctor.**

During the 2000 influenza season, some people who got the influenza vaccine had a reaction called oculo-respiratory syndrome (ORS). ORS occurred in response to one manufacturer's vaccine that year. ORS has occurred since only in a few people receiving the influenza vaccine. ORS can involve redness of both eyes, and in some people, a cough, sore throat, wheeze, tightness of chest, shortness of breath, or facial swelling. Most people who had ORS after an influenza shot did not have it again, while five to 34 per cent had it again but milder. Most people who experienced it again said they would still be revaccinated. Most people who had ORS can be safely vaccinated again. However, people who had severe reactions, including wheezing, chest tightness, difficulty breathing or swallowing, should talk to their doctor before getting another influenza shot. Call the local public health unit for more information on ORS.

## Who should not get the vaccine?

- Those with a moderate or severe acute illness, with or without fever.
- Those with a history of a shock-like allergic reaction, called anaphylaxis, to eggs or to a previous dose of any influenza vaccine, or to any component of the vaccine. Ask your doctor or public health nurse if you have any questions about the influenza vaccine.
- Infants under six months of age.

**NOTE: Acetaminophen, for example Tylenol<sup>®</sup>, can be given if fever or soreness is present after getting the vaccine. Acetylsalicylic acid, also known as ASA or Aspirin<sup>®</sup>, should NOT be given to anyone under 20 years of age due to the risk of Reye's Syndrome.**

## Mature minor consent

While every effort is made to seek parental or guardian informed consent prior to immunizations, children under the age of 19 who are able to fully understand the risks and benefits of specific immunizations may consent to, or refuse, immunizations, regardless of the parent's or guardian's wishes. Appropriate steps are taken to avoid peer influence in these decisions. It is recommended that parents/guardians and their minor children discuss immunizations, and ask the nurse or doctor questions before immunization.

## For more information, see the following BC HealthFiles:

[#12a Why Seniors Should Get Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccinations](#)

[#12b Facts About Influenza \(the Flu\)](#)

[#12c Influenza \(Flu\) Immunization: Myths and Facts](#)

[#85 Hand Washing for Parents and Kids](#)



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- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

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