

## Why Seniors Should Get Influenza (Flu) Vaccinations

### 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. 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 people 65 years and older, and those with health concerns, to be immunized every year.

### How is influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from person to person through breathing, coughing and sneezing. The virus can also be spread when a person touches tiny droplets from coughs or sneezes on another person or an object, and then touches their own mouth or nose before washing their hands properly.

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 cough and weakness possibly lasting one to two weeks more.

An infected person can spread the influenza virus even before feeling sick. An infected adult can

spread the virus from about one day before and up to five days after symptoms start. Children can spread the virus for a longer time - up to 21 days after symptoms start.

### How dangerous is influenza?

The greatest concern from influenza is that it lowers the body's ability to fight other infections. Bacterial pneumonia is the most common complication from influenza, especially in elderly people. Influenza can also lead to more complications for people who have heart, lung or other health concerns. These complications can sometimes be fatal.

### What should seniors know about the influenza shot?

As people age, they become more prone to complications of infections. Doctors consider seniors to be at high risk of getting very sick from influenza and advise all seniors to get their influenza shot every year. The influenza shot is provided free of charge to seniors. It is a simple preventive measure that can help people stay healthy and even save lives.

The influenza vaccine is very safe. The influenza vaccine **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 actual influenza infection.

Some people with certain medical conditions or allergies should not get the influenza shot. Ask your doctor or public health nurse if you have any questions.

### **When should seniors get the influenza shot?**

For seniors 65 years and older, the protection from the influenza vaccine drops within about six months. That is why it is important for seniors to get the influenza shot before the beginning of the influenza season, which is usually in December. In British Columbia, the vaccine will be available starting in early November. It is best if the influenza vaccine is given by the end of November if possible, to give the body enough time - about two weeks - to build up immunity before influenza season starts. Getting the influenza shot in November will also help maintain the body's immunity through the peak of the influenza season, which is usually between December and March. The influenza vaccine can however, offer protection from influenza if given at any time during the influenza season.

In addition to an influenza shot, people 65 years and older should be vaccinated against pneumococcal disease. The pneumococcal vaccine will protect against pneumococcal infections of the brain (meningitis), bloodstream (bacteremia), lungs (pneumonia), or ear (otitis media). It is safe to get the influenza and pneumococcal vaccines at the same time. However the pneumococcal vaccine protects for several years and should NOT be given each year.

### **Influenza vaccination of caregivers**

Influenza vaccination is encouraged for caregivers, health care workers and others who are in close contact with seniors. The influenza shot is also available for purchase by people who are not eligible to receive it free of charge. For more information about who is eligible, see BC HealthFile [#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Immunization Programs in BC](#).

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

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

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

[#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Immunization Programs in BC](#)

[#62b Pneumococcal Infection: Polysaccharide Vaccine](#)



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