

## Influenza (Flu) Immunization: Myths and Facts

Getting immunized against influenza (the 'flu'), is a safe, effective and healthy choice to make.

Although many people use the term the 'flu' to refer to any illness due to a virus, like 'stomach flu', influenza virus itself causes illness that tends to be more severe than other viruses. The influenza virus can make you very sick, and can even cause death for people with certain chronic health concerns. An influenza shot, also known as a flu shot, is the best protection against this disease. This BC HealthFile provides information to address myths and facts about influenza immunization.

**Myth:** Influenza is not a serious illness.

**Fact:** Each year in BC, hundreds of people die from influenza, or from complications of influenza such as pneumonia. Influenza is a highly contagious infection of the nose, throat and lungs. Although some symptoms are like the common cold, other symptoms are more serious, including headache, chills, a dry cough, and body aches and fever. Influenza in people 65 years of age and older, and in other high risk groups can lead to more serious health concerns. Fever and other body symptoms can usually last seven to 10 days, with cough and weakness possibly lasting up to one to two weeks more.

**Myth:** You have never had influenza so you do not need to be immunized.

**Fact:** No one is totally immune from influenza viruses. Most people can get sick with influenza several times over the course of his or her life.

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

An influenza shot is the best protection against influenza.

**Myth:** The influenza vaccine can give you influenza.

**Fact:** The influenza vaccine **cannot** give you influenza. The influenza vaccine contains dead influenza viruses that cannot multiply or cause infection.

**Myth:** The influenza vaccine causes severe reactions or side effects.

**Fact:** Influenza vaccine is very safe. Most people experience no symptoms after their influenza shot other than some 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 against influenza for the first time. These symptoms are due to the body's immune response that is building to protect against actual infection. These 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.

**Myth:** Getting an influenza shot every year weakens your immune system.

**Fact:** The vaccine prepares and boosts your immune system to help you fight the virus if you contract it. People who get the influenza shot each year are better protected against influenza than those who do not get vaccinated.

**Myth:** You should not get the influenza shot because you have a number of different allergies.

**Fact:** Most allergies are not a reason for not getting an influenza shot. People who have had a previous allergic reaction to the influenza vaccine, or any of its components, including eggs, should talk to their doctor before getting an influenza shot.

**Myth:** The influenza vaccine protects against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses.

**Fact:** The influenza virus is very different and more severe than the common cold or the ‘stomach flu’. 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’.

**Myth:** The vaccine doesn't work because you still get influenza.

**Fact:** At any given time there are many different types of viruses around that can cause symptoms like influenza, but are not actually the influenza virus.

The influenza vaccine contains the three strains or types of influenza virus that health experts think are likely to cause influenza for the coming winter. These are the only viruses the vaccine will protect against. Because these strains may change each year, a person needs to get the influenza shot each year to be protected against new strains.

When the strains in the vaccine are well-matched to the strains of influenza virus in the community, the influenza shot prevents influenza in more than seven of 10 vaccinated persons. In elderly people and people who have certain chronic health conditions, the vaccine may not work as well to prevent infection, but it will still decrease symptoms and the risk of serious health concerns, such as hospitalization and death.

**Myth:** You are pregnant and should not have an influenza shot.

**Fact:** An influenza vaccine is safe during pregnancy. In fact, pregnant women with high risk conditions, such as heart or lung disease, diabetes or weakened immune systems, are recommended to get an influenza shot to protect themselves. Even healthy pregnant women who may deliver their baby during the influenza season should get an

influenza shot to protect their newborn baby. Babies less than six months of age, especially newborns, are at high risk from the complications of influenza, but cannot be vaccinated because their immune response to influenza vaccine is not as strong. Vaccinating their close contacts, including their mothers, can help to protect them and reduce their risk of becoming infected. It is safe for babies to breast-feed after their mothers have been immunized with the influenza vaccine.

If you have questions about getting an influenza shot during your pregnancy, speak with your health care provider.

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

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

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

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

[#87 Norovirus \(Stomach Flu\)](#)



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