

Influenza (The Flu)

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

What is influenza (the flu)?

- The flu is a viral illness spread from person to person by coughing or through contact with nasal fluids.
- Symptoms are usually more serious than a cold.
- Symptoms may include fever, headache, cough, muscle aches, runny nose, sore throat and exhaustion.
- Symptoms can be similar to other viral illnesses. However, onset of the flu is usually more sudden.
- Some people may carry and spread the flu virus but have no flu symptoms.
- Illness usually lasts two to seven days, sometimes longer in the elderly and in people with chronic diseases.
- The flu arrives in Manitoba every year in late fall or early winter.

How can you protect yourself and others against influenza?

Yearly vaccination is the best way.

- Annual influenza immunization campaigns are held every fall.
- Manitoba Health offers free vaccine to people who are “at risk” and their caregivers.

Other ways include:

- Wash your hands often, particularly after coughing or touching your nose.

- Keep your hands away from your eyes and nose.
- Stay home if you are sick.

Do not visit patients in hospitals or personal care homes if you have cold or flu symptoms.

Who is “at risk” for influenza and should receive the vaccine?

- Anyone 65 years of age or over.
- Residents of personal care homes and other chronic care facilities.
- Persons of any age with chronic heart or lung disease.
- Anyone with cancer, anemia or a weakened immune system due to disease or medication.
- Persons with other chronic conditions such as diabetes, kidney disease, inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, alcoholism and multiple sclerosis may also benefit.
- People with any condition that reduces their ability to breathe or increases their risk of choking. Such conditions may include spinal cord injury, seizure disorders, mental disability, nervous system and muscular disorders.
- Children on long-term aspirin therapy.
- Healthy children six to 23 months of age.

Who else should receive the vaccine?

- People capable of spreading influenza to those at high risk should also receive an annual flu shot. This includes:
 - household contacts of those at risk, such as small children up to 23 months of age; seniors aged 65 years and older; and individuals with a weakened immune system due to disease or medication;
 - health care workers, because they may unknowingly spread the flu to their patients;
 - other staff in settings where care is provided for those at high risk (ex: personal care home staff, volunteers who work with seniors);
 - first responders (police officers, fire fighters, ambulance workers);
 - anyone providing child care to infants up to 23 months of age in or out of the home;
 - pregnant women in their third trimester if they are expected to deliver in flu season (October-March).

What is the flu vaccine?

- The vaccine is an inactivated (killed virus) vaccine that contains three different virus strains. It is prepared in eggs.
- The vaccine is made from inactive virus, so it cannot give you the flu.
- It is important to be immunized against the flu every year because the virus that causes the flu changes every year, and protection from the vaccine decreases with time.

How effective is the flu vaccine?

- Influenza vaccination protects about 70 per cent of healthy children and adults.
- Studies involving nursing home residents have shown influenza vaccine to be 50-60 per cent effective in preventing hospitalization and 85 per cent effective in preventing death.
- Protection from the flu begins approximately two weeks following immunization and can last for six months or longer. In the elderly, protection may start to decrease after four months.

How is the flu vaccine given?

- For children 12 months and older and adults, the flu vaccine is given with a needle into the muscle of the upper arm.
- For infants (six to 11 months of age), the vaccine is given in the upper thigh.

Are booster doses required?

- Previously unvaccinated children younger than nine years of age, who have never before received a flu shot, need two doses of influenza vaccine at least four weeks apart. A second dose is not required if a child has received one or more doses of vaccine during a previous flu season.

Can the flu vaccine be given at the same time as other vaccines?

- Yes. It is safe to give more than one vaccine at a clinic visit.

What are common side effects of the influenza vaccine?

- Local reactions are common and normal, and may include soreness and redness at the injection site for up to two days.
- Other reactions can include fever, headache or myalgia (tenderness or pain in the muscles).
- If these symptoms persist or become worse, seek medical advice.

Rare side effects

- Guillain-Barré syndrome, a form of paralysis that is usually temporary, occurs rarely, estimated at one in every 1,000,000 vaccinations.
- Reactions such as allergic responses, severe pain or swelling should be reported to your public health nurse or doctor.
- In the past few seasons some individuals experienced one or more of the following symptoms: red eyes, shortness of breath, chest tightness, cough, sore throat or swelling of part or all of the face. These signs and symptoms usually appeared within 24 hours of immunization and disappeared within two days. *Anyone who had a reaction should check with their health care provider to find out if they should be immunized again.*

Who should not get the flu vaccine?

- Anyone who has a severe allergy to egg protein, formaldehyde, gelatin, neomycin, thimerosal or latex (vaccine content varies by manufacturer). Check with your public health nurse or doctor if you are not sure about getting the flu vaccine.
- Infants younger than six months of age.
- Anyone who has a serious acute illness, with or without a fever, on the day they are to be immunized. A mild illness, with or without a low fever, is not a reason to avoid immunization.

- Persons who have developed Guillain-Barré syndrome, or any other demyelinating neurologic illness within six weeks of a previous influenza vaccination.

How can I be immunized?

- If you are in one of the groups listed above, visit a public health clinic (schedules and locations announced every fall) or your health care provider for free vaccine. Some doctors' offices may charge a fee for supplies.
- If you are not in one of the groups listed above, check with a doctor's office or pharmacist to see if you can purchase the vaccine.

What should you do if you think you have the flu?

- Most people can manage the flu at home with plenty of rest, fluids and acetaminophen (also called Tylenol® or Tempra®) for fever control and muscle aches. **Do not give ASA (aspirin) to children.**
- Antibiotics do not help unless bacterial complications develop.
- New antiviral drugs can reduce and shorten the length of influenza symptoms when taken early in the illness. These drugs need to be started early (within 48 hours of onset of symptoms) and are not currently eligible for provincial drug program reimbursement.
- You should see your doctor if:
 - you have a cough with cloudy (yellow or green) phlegm, especially with persistent high fever;
 - you have difficulty breathing, or are not getting better after trying rest, fluids and acetaminophen;
 - you have a small child with a high fever.

Recommended Resources:

Available at local bookstores:

- *Your Child's Best Shot: A Parents' Guide to Vaccination* (2002). Canadian Paediatric Society
- *What Every Parent Should Know About Vaccines* (2002). Dr. Paul Offitt & Dr. Louis M. Bell

Available on the Internet:

- Government of Manitoba – Public Health Branch
www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/index.html
- Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness & Promotion – Canadian Public Health Association
www.immunize.cpha.ca
- Public Health Agency of Canada – Immunization
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/index.html
- Canadian Paediatric Society
www.caringforkids.cps.ca/immunization/index.html
- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention – USA
www.cdc.gov/flu/
- Immunization Action Coalition
www.immunize.org/

Information about the shots that you or your children receive may be recorded in the Manitoba Immunization Monitoring System (MIMS). This computerized database allows your doctor, your child's doctor or your public health nurse to find out what shots you or your child have had or need to have. Information collected in MIMS may be used to produce vaccination records, or notify you or your doctor if someone has missed a particular shot. Manitoba Health may use the information to monitor how well different vaccines work in preventing disease.

If you need information on the shots that you or your child has received, contact your doctor, your local public health unit or nursing station.

For more information

Talk to your local public health nurse, doctor, or Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 in Winnipeg or toll-free at 1-888-315-9257, or access our website at www.gov.mb.ca/health/flu.

Local Public Health Unit Stamp