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GETTING PROTECTION AGAINST INFLUENZA: THE FACTS

Influenza (commonly known as "the flu") is a serious, acute respiratory illness that is caused by a virus. People who get influenza can have a cough, fever, chills, sore throat, headache, muscle aches and fatigue. Illness due to influenza usually lasts from two to seven days, but can last longer. The cough and fatigue can persist for several weeks, making the return to routine personal and work activities difficult.

Influenza can lead to pneumonia, hospitalization, and even death in some people, particularly the elderly and those with chronic medical conditions, such as heart or lung problems.

Influenza spreads by respiratory droplets mainly from infected persons through coughing and sneezing. It may also spread through direct contact with contaminated surfaces, unwashed hands, or objects such as toys and eating utensils contaminated by the influenza virus.

Who should get the flu vaccine?

According to the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, everyone aged six months or older should be immunized, unless there is a medical reason not to do so.

Why should healthy people get the flu vaccine?

Healthy people should get vaccinated to protect themselves and their families from influenza to avoid spreading the virus to others, missing quality time with their families or losing time from work.

Influenza is much worse than a cold. Even healthy, young people can become quite ill. You might bring the influenza virus home to a baby, older relative, or someone with a medical condition who could develop serious complications from influenza.

Why should children be immunized?

Several studies have shown the benefits of influenza immunization in children. Infection rates in children are much higher than in adults, and may lead to hospitalization in healthy children (particularly those under the age of two) as well as in children with underlying high-risk medical conditions. Influenza in preschoolers is also associated with acute middle ear infections (there is evidence that immunization can decrease the incidence of middle ear infections associated with influenza). Children are also the main spreaders of the virus at both school and home. The vaccination of children has been shown to prevent school absenteeism.

Why should seniors be immunized?

Anyone 65 or older is considered to be in the high-risk category for complications from the flu. Each year, 70,000 to 75,000 people are hospitalized with the flu and pneumonia in Canada. Almost 5,000 Canadians, most of them seniors, die from flu and pneumonia each year.

A flu shot can help prevent hospitalization and pneumonia in up to 60 per cent of seniors who come down with the flu, and can prevent death in about 85 per cent of the cases.

How well does the influenza vaccine protect against the flu?

Vaccine effectiveness varies from one person to another. Protection from the vaccine develops about two weeks after the shot, and immunity lasts less than one year.

When the vaccine and circulating viruses are similar, the vaccine is about 70 to 90 per cent effective in preventing influenza illness in healthy adults and children. In elderly people, the vaccine can prevent pneumonia and hospitalization in about six out of 10 people and is up to 95 per cent effective in preventing death. In older persons, living in residential facilities, the vaccine may be 50 to 60 per cent effective in preventing pneumonia and hospitalization and up to 95 per cent effective in preventing death.

People who receive the vaccine can still get influenza. However, if they do get influenza, it is usually milder than it would have been without the shot.

Why do people need a flu shot every year?

The viruses that cause influenza change frequently. As a result, influenza vaccine is updated each year. Since the flu virus changes from year to year, immunity to last year's flu viruses may not protect you against the viruses that are expected to cause influenza this year. Furthermore, immunity from a flu shot usually lasts less than one year. So, it's important to get a flu shot every year.

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