

# Influenza Vaccine Fact Sheet

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

## What is Influenza?

Influenza (commonly known as “the flu”) is a serious, acute respiratory illness that is caused by a virus. People who get influenza may have a fever, chills, cough, runny eyes, stuffy nose, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, extreme weakness and fatigue. **Note: the elderly may not have a fever.** Children can also have earaches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. The cough and fatigue can persist for several weeks, making the return to full personal and work activities difficult.

People of any age can get the flu. Illness due to influenza usually lasts two to seven days; sometimes longer in the elderly and in people with chronic diseases. Most people who get influenza are ill for only a few days. However, some people can become very ill, possibly developing complications and requiring hospitalization.

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

## How well does the influenza vaccine protect against the flu?

When there is a good match between the influenza strains in the vaccine and the influenza strains circulating in the community, the vaccine can prevent influenza illness in about 70% to 90% of healthy children and adults. The vaccine is less effective in persons with diseases of the immune system or the elderly. However, in older persons, living in residential facilities, the vaccine may be 50% to 60% effective in preventing pneumonia and hospitalization, and up to 95% effective in preventing death (2006-2007 NACI Statement on Influenza).

It takes about two weeks after the immunization to develop protection against influenza; protection may last up to one year. People who receive the vaccine can still get influenza, but if they do, it is usually milder. However, the vaccine will not protect against colds and other respiratory illnesses that may be mistaken for influenza, but are not caused by the influenza virus.

## Can the influenza vaccine cause the flu?

No. The vaccine does not contain live virus so you cannot get the flu from the vaccine.

## When should the influenza vaccine be given?

The recommended time to receive the influenza vaccine (depending on vaccine availability) is October to mid-November, before the flu season starts.

## Who should get the influenza vaccine?

All individuals aged 6 months or older who live, work or attend school in Ontario are eligible to receive the publicly funded influenza vaccine through the Universal Influenza Immunization Program (UIIP).

In the event of a temporarily limited vaccine supply, priority should be given to the immunization of the high priority groups; these include:

- i. persons at high risk of influenza-related complications
- ii. persons capable of transmitting influenza to those at high risk of influenza-related complications and
- iii. others

## **Which persons are included in these “high priority” groups?**

### **(i) Persons at High Risk of Influenza-related Complications:**

1. Adults and children with chronic health conditions, that require regular medical follow up or hospital care. These high risk conditions include the following:
  - Heart or lung disorders
  - Diabetes and other metabolic diseases
  - Cancer and other conditions that decrease immunity
  - Kidney disease
  - Diseases of the blood
  - Medical conditions that affect the management of respiratory (chest) secretions
  - Long term treatment with acetylsalicylic acid “aspirin” (Children and adolescents only)
2. People of any age who are residents of nursing homes or other chronic care facilities.
3. People 65 years of age or over.
4. Healthy children aged 6-23 months.

### **(ii) Persons Capable of Transmitting Influenza to those at High Risk of Influenza-related Complications:**

1. Health care workers and other care providers in facilities and community settings, and emergency response personnel who, through their activities, could transmit influenza to persons at high risk of influenza complications.
2. Household contacts (adults and children) of persons at high risk of influenza complications (whether or not the “high risk” persons have been immunized). These contacts include household contacts of children less than 6 months of age (who are at high risk of complications from influenza but for whom there is no effective available vaccine) and of children aged 6 to 23 months. Pregnant women should be immunized in their third trimester if they are expected to deliver during influenza season, as they will become household contacts of their newborn.

3. Those providing regular child care to children aged 0 to 23 months, whether in or out of the home.
4. Those who provide services within closed or relatively closed settings to persons at high risk (e.g. crew on ships).

### **(iii) Other High Priority Persons:**

1. Persons in direct contact with avian-influenza infected poultry during culling operations.

## **Why should healthy adults and children get the flu vaccine?**

Healthy people should get vaccinated to protect themselves and their families from influenza; to avoid missing quality time (including holidays) with their families; to avoid losing time from work; and to avoid spreading the virus to others, particularly those who can become very ill from influenza.

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.

Children can also benefit from influenza immunization. Influenza in preschoolers is associated with acute middle ear infections. Influenza may also lead to hospitalization in healthy children, particularly those under two years of age, as well as in children with underlying high-risk medical conditions. Children are also the main spreaders of the virus, in both the school and household settings. Influenza immunization can help to decrease the number of middle ear infections associated with influenza, reduce school absenteeism and help to prevent the community transmission of influenza.

## **How many doses of the vaccine do I need?**

Because the influenza virus changes often, it is necessary to get the flu shot every year, for protection against the new virus strains that may be circulating that year.

Children younger than nine years of age, being vaccinated against influenza for the first time, need two doses given at least one month apart. *The second dose of influenza vaccine is not needed if the*

*child has received one or more doses of influenza vaccine during a previous season.*

### **Do I have to pay for the flu shot?**

No. The influenza vaccine is available **free of charge** to individuals aged 6 months or older who live, work or attend school in Ontario. The vaccine will be available through physicians and through community-based flu clinics which may be offered by public health units, Community Health Centres (CHCs), Community Care Access Centres (CCACs), Public Hospitals, Long-Term Care Homes (LTCHs), and pharmacies, as well as employer-sponsored clinics.

### **How can I keep track of my flu shots and other immunizations?**

After you receive your immunization, you should ask for a written record of your immunization from the doctor or nurse who administered your shot. Keep it in a safe place!

### **Who should not get the influenza vaccine?**

The following persons should **not** get the influenza vaccine:

- Infants under six months of age (the current vaccine is not recommended for this age group).
- Anyone with a serious allergy (anaphylaxis) to eggs or egg products. A serious allergic reaction usually means that the person develops hives, swelling of the mouth and throat or has trouble breathing after eating eggs or egg products.
- Anyone who has a severe allergy to any component of the vaccine. Your health care provider can tell you which components are in the specific vaccine. Some vaccines contain small quantities of antibiotics or preservatives.
- Anyone who had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the influenza vaccine.
- It is not known whether the influenza vaccine causes an increased risk of recurrent Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) in persons who previously had GBS. Anyone who developed GBS within 8 weeks of a previous influenza immunization should avoid influenza immunization in the future.

### **The vaccine should be temporarily delayed in the following persons:**

- Anyone who is ill with a fever should usually wait until the fever goes down before being immunized.
- Immunization should be **delayed** in individuals with active neurologic disorders, but should be considered when the disease process has been stabilized.
- Anyone with an acute respiratory infection or any other active infection (until it subsides).

### **What are the risks from influenza vaccine?**

The influenza vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing side effects, which can be either mild or, occasionally, severe. The risk of the vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small.

Most people who get the vaccine have either no side effects or mild side effects such as soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site. Life-threatening allergic reactions are very rare. If they do occur, it is within a few minutes to a few hours after receiving the vaccine.

### ***Guillain-Barré Syndrome (or GBS)***

GBS is a very uncommon disease that causes muscle paralysis and has been associated with certain infectious diseases. Overall, the risk of GBS occurring in association with immunization is small. In comparison to the small risk of GBS, the risk of illness and death associated with influenza is much greater.

### ***Oculo-Respiratory Syndrome (or ORS)***

During the 2000/2001 season, a small number of people who received the vaccine developed a side effect called Oculo-Respiratory Syndrome or ORS. ORS is described as the onset of red eyes and/or respiratory symptoms (cough, wheeze, chest tightness, difficulty breathing, difficulty swallowing, hoarseness or sore throat) and/or swelling of the face, occurring **within 24 hours** of influenza immunization. Since 2000/2001, fewer cases of ORS have been reported.

Persons who experienced ORS symptoms in the past may be safely re-immunized with influenza vaccine except for those who have experienced ORS with severe lower respiratory symptoms (wheeze, chest tightness, difficulty breathing) within 24 hours of

influenza immunization. These individuals should seek expert medical advice before being immunized again with the influenza vaccine.

**When should I seek medical attention after immunization with the Influenza vaccine?**

You should seek medical attention if you believe that you, or someone in your care, has had a reaction to a vaccine.

***Any serious reaction to a vaccine should be reported to your health care provider who will report these occurrences to your local public health unit.***

**Who should I talk to if I have any questions about influenza or any other vaccines?**

If you are looking for general information about influenza or the vaccine, the province's Universal Influenza Immunization Program, or the location of a clinic near you, please call: 1-877-844-1944 (TTY#1-800-387-5559) or visit website: [www.health.gov.on.ca](http://www.health.gov.on.ca).

If you have questions about the vaccine that are specific to your medical condition, you should ask your doctor or call your local public health unit.

**For additional information on influenza, please visit the following web sites:**

- a) Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care:  
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca>
- b) Public Health Agency of Canada site:  
National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) Statement 2006-2007  
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ccdr-rmtc/06pdf/asc-32-07.pdf>
- c) Canadian Coalition for Influenza Immunization Awareness and Promotion:  
<http://www.immunize.cpha.ca>
- d) Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Influenza: Prevention and Control Home Page  
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu>
- e) Canadian Pediatric Society: Recommendations for the use of Influenza Vaccine for Children.  
<http://www.cps.ca/english/statements/ID/ID04-01.htm>

INFOline: 1-877-234-4343 toll free in Ontario (TTY: 1-800-387-5559)

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000 (TTY: 1-866-797-0007)

*Or call your local public health unit.*

Version française disponible en communiquant avec le 1 877 234-4343 ATS: 1 800 387-5559

Web site: <http://www.SanteOntario.com>