

Why Seniors Should Get the Influenza (Flu) Vaccine

What should seniors know about the influenza vaccine?

The influenza or flu vaccine is a safe effective way to help people stay healthy, prevent illness, and even save lives. As people age, they may be at higher risk of influenza and complications. Doctors consider seniors to be at high risk of getting very sick from influenza and advise all seniors, and their household contacts and caregivers, to get an influenza vaccine or shot each year.

The influenza vaccine is provided free to seniors. Call your doctor or local public health unit to get your annual influenza vaccine or flu shot.

The influenza vaccine is very safe. The influenza vaccine cannot give you influenza. The vaccine contains dead influenza viruses that cannot cause infection.

Most people have no symptoms after they get the influenza vaccine. Some may have redness or soreness for one or two days 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 6 to 12 hours and ending within 24 to 48 hours. These are less severe and last a very short time compared to influenza infection.

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

When should seniors get the influenza vaccine?

It is important for seniors to get the influenza vaccine before the influenza season starts.

In British Columbia, the vaccine is available starting in October or early November. For the best protection, you should try to get the influenza vaccine by the end of November to give your body enough time - about two weeks - to build immunity before the influenza season starts. This will also help your body maintain its immunity during the peak of the influenza season, usually between November and April. However, the influenza vaccine can provide protection if given at any time during the season.

In addition to an influenza shot, seniors 65 years and older should be vaccinated against pneumococcal disease. The pneumococcal vaccine protects against infections of the brain, bloodstream, lungs, or ear. It is safe to get the influenza and pneumococcal vaccines at the same time. However, the pneumococcal vaccine protects against the disease for several years so you should not get this every year.

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by an influenza virus.

Symptoms can include fever, headache, muscle pain, runny nose, sore throat, extreme tiredness, and cough. Although colds and other viruses may cause similar symptoms, those due to the influenza virus tend to be worse.

You can reduce the risk of catching influenza, or spreading it to others, by washing your hands regularly, eating well and exercising, and getting the influenza vaccine.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from person to person through coughing, sneezing, or having face-to-face contact. The virus can also spread when a person touches tiny droplets from coughs or sneezes on another person or an object, and then touches his or her own mouth or nose before washing his or her hands.

Symptoms can begin about one to four days, or an average of two days, after a person is first exposed to the influenza virus. Fever and other symptoms can usually last 7 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 adult can spread the virus from about one day before to five days after symptoms start. Children can spread the virus up to 21 days after symptoms start.

How dangerous is influenza?

The greatest concern from influenza is that it reduces the body's ability to fight other infections. Bacterial pneumonia (infection of the lungs) 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.

Influenza Vaccination of Caregivers

Influenza vaccination is encouraged and provided free for family members, caregivers, health care workers and others who are in close contact with seniors.

For More Information

The influenza shot is also available for purchase by people who cannot receive it free of charge. For more information about the influenza vaccine, see BC HealthFile [#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#).

For more information on influenza or pneumococcal infection, see the following BC HealthFiles:

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

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

[#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#)

[#62b Pneumococcal Polysaccharide Vaccine](#)

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