

## Influenza (Flu) Immunization: Myths and Facts

Getting immunized against influenza or the 'flu' is a safe, effective and healthy choice to make. The influenza virus can cause serious illness and even death for people with certain chronic health concerns. The influenza vaccine, or flu shot, is the best protection against illness and complications.

Many people use the term the 'flu' to refer to any illness caused by a virus, such as 'stomach flu'. However, the influenza virus causes illness that tends to be more severe than other viruses.

This BC HealthFile provides information on the myths and facts of influenza immunization.

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

**Fact:** Each year in BC, hundreds of people die from influenza or complications, such as pneumonia. Influenza in people 65 years of age and older, and in other high risk groups, can lead to more serious health concerns.

**Myth:** You have never had influenza so you do not need to get the vaccine.

**Fact:** No one is immune from influenza viruses. Most people can get sick with influenza several times over the course of his or her life. An influenza vaccine, or flu shot, is the best protection against the influenza virus.

**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 cause infection.

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

**Fact:** The influenza vaccine is very safe. Most people experience no symptoms after getting the influenza vaccine other than redness or soreness where the needle was given. Some people, especially those getting the shot for the first time, experience some influenza-like symptoms. These are much less severe than influenza infection, and last for a much shorter time.

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

**Fact:** The influenza vaccine prepares and boosts your immune system against the virus. People who get the influenza vaccine each year are better protected against influenza than those who do not get it.

**Myth:** You should not get the influenza vaccine because you have allergies.

**Fact:** Most allergies are not a reason for not getting an influenza shot. People who have had an allergic reaction to a previous dose of the **influenza vaccine** should talk to their doctor before getting the vaccine.

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

**Fact:** The vaccine does not protect against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses, often called 'stomach flu'. The influenza virus is very different and more

severe than the common cold or the ‘stomach flu’. Influenza vaccine only helps to protect against the viruses that cause influenza.

**Myth:** The vaccine does not work because you still get influenza.

**Fact:** At any 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 viruses that health experts think are likely to cause influenza during the winter. The vaccine protects against only those viruses. Because these strains may change each year, a person needs to get the influenza vaccine 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 vaccine prevents influenza in more than 7 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 still decreases symptoms and the risk of serious health concerns or complications.

**Myth:** You are pregnant and should not get the influenza vaccine.

**Fact:** An influenza vaccine is safe during pregnancy. In fact, pregnant women who will be in their 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester during the influenza season, and pregnant women with high risk conditions, such as heart or lung disease, diabetes or weakened immune systems, are recommended to get the influenza vaccine to protect themselves. Influenza vaccine is provided free to pregnant women who will be in their 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester during the influenza season, or who have high risk conditions. If you have any questions about getting an influenza shot during your pregnancy, speak with your doctor or health care provider.

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 they cannot be vaccinated because their immune response to the vaccine is not as strong.

Vaccination for mothers and other close contacts can help protect babies and reduce their risk of infection. It is safe for babies to breastfeed after mothers receive the influenza vaccine.

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

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

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

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

[#87 Norovirus](#)

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