

Flu Facts for Families

Influenza (flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat and lungs. Flu is different from a cold and usually comes on suddenly. Severe flu complications are most common in children younger than age two and children with chronic health conditions like asthma and diabetes, as well as in adults with co-morbidities such as hypertension, diabetes and underlying respiratory illnesses. These complications can include pneumonia, dehydration and worsening of other long-term medical problems. Each year flu causes millions of illnesses, hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations and tens of thousands of deaths in the United States.

Symptoms

Typical flu symptoms may include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea (which are more common in children than adults and should not be confused with viral gastroenteritis). Some people with flu will not have a fever.

Spread of the Flu

Flu is usually spread from person to person through coughs and sneezes of an infected person. This causes droplets of the flu virus to move from the infected person onto other people or objects around them.

A transfer can also occur when a person touches their nose or mouth after coming into contact with infected droplets, nasal drainage or saliva from an infected person. Such contact can occur by touching an infected person directly or touching an object contaminated with these fluids, such as a used facial tissue. Touching the nose or mouth of a third person after such contact can also infect that person.

Adults and caregivers may spread the flu one day before symptoms appear and remain contagious for up to seven days.

If you or your child develops a fever (100°F or higher under the arm, 101°F or higher orally or 102°F or higher rectally), chills, cough, sore throat, headaches or muscle aches, stay home until you or your child is fever-free for 24 hours without the need for fever-reducing medicine and no longer experiencing severe symptoms. People are most contagious during the first three days of illness, but young children and those with weakened immune systems may remain contagious for longer.

Children at Greatest Risk of Complications

1. Children younger than six months old

The flu vaccine is not approved for use in infants younger than six months.

2. Children aged six months up to their fifth birthday

Children in this age group, who are otherwise healthy, are at increased risk for serious flu illness because their immune systems are not yet fully developed.

3. American Indian and Alaskan Native children

These children are more likely to have severe flu illness that results in hospitalization or death due to socioeconomic factors, access to healthcare and underlying health conditions.

4. Children six months and older with chronic health problems

Children with chronic health problems, such as asthma or other lung conditions, neurologic and neurodevelopmental issues, chronic lung disease, heart disease, blood disorders, endocrine disorders, kidney disorders, liver disorders, metabolic disorders or a weakened immune are at particular risk for flu complications. Children taking aspirin or salicylate-containing medications or those with extreme obesity may have a reduced ability to mount an immune response to the vaccine. This should be discussed with a doctor.

Parents should talk to their child's pediatrician about whether the flu vaccine is best for their child.

Prevention of the Flu

A flu vaccine will not prevent you from getting the flu, but it can lessen the severity of the illness. It also helps reduce its spread and lowers the risk of flu-related hospitalization and death.

An effective way to reduce the spread of flu after exposure is to cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing and to wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and dry them with a clean towel. You may use hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available. Teach your child these prevention measures and send facial tissues and alcohol-based wipes/gels with them for use at school. Be sure to dispose of used tissues promptly to prevent the spread of influenza. Avoiding close contact with family members, co-workers and classmates while ill also helps reduce the risk of spreading the flu.

Types of Flu Vaccines

There are two types of flu vaccine: the shot (given with an injection, usually in the arm) and the nasal spray vaccine.

The nasal flu vaccine (FluMist) contains a weakened live virus (live attenuated influenza vaccine, or LAIV). Because of this, it is important to avoid contact with people who are sick or immunocompromised for several days after receiving the vaccine.

While these vaccines do not guarantee you won't get the flu, they can lessen the severity of the illness. Reducing the severity also lowers the risk of hospitalization and death.

Who Should Get a Flu Vaccine?

Everyone 6 months and older is eligible to get a flu vaccine every season with rare exceptions. The CDC recommends that the following individuals consider getting a flu vaccine:

- Parents and other close contacts of children younger than five years of age (people who live with them)
- Out-of-home caregivers (nannies, day care providers, etc.) of children younger than five years of age
- People who live with or have other close contact with a child of any age with a chronic health problem (asthma, diabetes, etc.)
- Health care workers

If you are considering receiving the flu vaccine and are at higher risk of serious complications from influenza, talk to your physician about whether or not a respiratory illness vaccine is right for you.

For information, visit the CDC "Who Needs a Flu Vaccine" webpage: www.cdc.gov/flu/vaccines/vaccinations.html

Vaccine Side Effects & Contraindications

Side effects of the flu vaccine are generally mild and go away on their own within a few days. Common side effects from the flu shot include soreness, redness and/or swelling from the shot; headache; nausea; fever; and muscle aches.

Certain studies suggest a potential small association between injectable flu vaccines and Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS). Overall, these studies estimated the risk for GBS after vaccination to be fewer than 1 or 2 cases of GBS per one million people vaccinated. Other studies have not found any association.

For more information about vaccine contraindications, go to: www.cdc.gov/flu/hcp/vax-summary/vaccine-safety.html

Vaccine Availability

Yearly flu vaccination can begin as soon as the vaccine is available, typically in October but vaccinations are available throughout the flu season, which usually peaks in January.

Special Instructions for Children Vaccinated Against Flu for the First Time

Parents of children aged six months to nine years receiving their first flu vaccine are advised to talk to their doctor about vaccination as early as possible because they will need to receive two doses, spread apart by a minimum of 28 days.

The first dose primes the immune system, while the second dose provides immune protection. Children receiving the vaccine for the first time who only get one dose can have reduced to no protection from the flu.

Please note: it usually takes about two weeks after the second dose for protection against the flu to begin.

Is There Medicine to Treat the Flu?

Antiviral drugs are available for children ages one year and older to reduce flu symptoms and help them recover faster, but they must be prescribed by a doctor. These medications are most effective when started within 12 hours of illness onset but may still help lessen symptoms if begun within 72 hours. Your doctor can advise whether these drugs are appropriate for your child.

Where can I get Vaccinated?

Contact your health care provider or parish health unit to make a vaccination appointment. Check parish-level information online at:

www.ldh.la.gov/page/vaccine-availability.

Locate pharmacies providing flu vaccinations at:

www.vaccines.gov.

