

The influenza virus can cause serious illness and even death in people with certain chronic health conditions. Flu vaccines are a safe and effective way to help people stay healthy, prevent illness, and even save lives.



Influenza and Vaccines: Myth and Fact

Many people use the term flu to refer to any illness caused by a virus, such as “stomach flu” or the common cold. However, the influenza virus causes illness that tends to be more severe than these viruses.

Influenza symptoms, such as a dry cough, sore throat, fever, chills, headache, fatigue, and body aches, are more severe and can last on average for five to seven days.

Below you will find some common myths and facts about influenza:

Myth: Influenza is not a serious illness.

Fact: Hundreds of people may die from influenza or its complications, such as pneumonia. Influenza can lead to serious illness in seniors over 65 years and in other high risk groups.

Myth: I have never had influenza, so I do not need to get an influenza vaccine.

Fact: Influenza viruses change or mutate often. Most people can get sick with influenza several times during their lives. An annual influenza vaccine is the best protection against the influenza virus.

Myth: The influenza vaccines can give me influenza.

Fact: The inactivated influenza vaccine or flu shot cannot give you influenza. The vaccine contains killed influenza viruses that cannot cause infection.

The live attenuated influenza vaccine given as a nasal spray contains weakened influenza viruses. Common reactions to the live vaccine include mild symptoms, such as runny nose, nasal congestion, cough, sore throat and fever. These symptoms are less severe than those from influenza infection and last a shorter time. As a precaution, people with weakened immune systems should not get the live vaccine.

Myth: The influenza vaccines cause severe reactions or side effects.

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Myth: Vaccines don't work because I still get the flu.

Fact: There are many different types of viruses year-round that can cause flu-like symptoms but these are not actually the influenza virus.

The influenza vaccines protect against the three strains of influenza viruses that health experts think will likely cause influenza during the current flu season. The vaccines do not protect against other viruses that cause similar illnesses, like respiratory syncytial virus,

which is also known as RSV, or parainfluenza.

Because the influenza virus strains change most years, you need to get immunized each year to be protected against new strains.

In elderly people and people who have certain chronic health conditions, the vaccines may not prevent influenza completely but may decrease symptoms, complications and the risk of death from influenza.

Fact: The influenza vaccines are safe. Most people who get the flu shot only have redness, soreness or swelling where the vaccine was given. Some people, especially those who get the flu shot for the first time, may have a headache, muscle aches or tiredness. People who receive the live attenuated influenza vaccine may have mild influenza symptoms as described above.

Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) is a rare condition that can result in weakness and paralysis of the body's muscles. It most commonly occurs after infection, but in rare cases can also occur after some vaccines. GBS may be associated with influenza vaccine in about one per million recipients.

Myth: Getting an influenza vaccine every year weakens my immune system

Fact: Influenza vaccines boost your immune system to protect against the virus instead of weakening it.

Myth: I should not get an influenza vaccine because I have allergies.

Fact: Most people with allergies can get an influenza vaccine without any problems. However, if you have had a severe allergic reaction to a previous dose of the influenza vaccine or any component of the vaccine, talk to your health care provider. You may need to be tested for allergies before being immunized. People with egg allergies can be safely immunized with the inactivated influenza vaccine. It is not known if the live attenuated influenza vaccine is safe for people with egg allergies.

Myth: The influenza vaccines protect against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses.

Fact: Influenza vaccines do not protect against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses, which is often called the stomach flu. The influenza virus is very different and causes more severe illness than the common cold or the stomach flu. Influenza vaccines only protect against the viruses that cause influenza.

Myth: I am pregnant and should not get an influenza vaccine.

Fact: The inactivated influenza vaccine or flu shot is considered safe at any stage of pregnancy. Women in the second half of pregnancy are at higher risk of hospitalization due to influenza, especially those in the third trimester. As well, women at any stage of pregnancy who have chronic medical conditions are also at higher risk of serious influenza complications and should be immunized.

It is not known if the live attenuated influenza vaccine is safe during pregnancy. Pregnant women, or those intending to become pregnant, should receive the inactivated influenza vaccine, which contains killed influenza viruses that cannot cause infection.

Myth: I am a nursing mother and should not get an influenza vaccine.

Fact: It is safe for babies to breast feed after mothers receive the influenza vaccine.

Influenza Self Care at Home

Self care at home is the best way to get better from influenza. Follow these tips to help speed up your recovery:

- Rest as long as you continue to feel tired, and sleep as much as you can.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Take a cool sponge bath or soak in a tepid bathtub for relief of fever.
- Inhale warm steam from the shower, or from a warm drink, for cough relief.
- To relieve a sore throat gargle with warm salt water.

Mix together:

- One teaspoon (5 mL) of salt,
- One teaspoon (5 mL) of baking soda,
- Two cups (500 mL) of water.

- Use throat lozenges.
- To help clear a stuffy nose use saline nose drops or sprays.
- Use a clean cool mist humidifier to increase air moisture to thin lung secretions.
- Avoid alcohol and don't smoke. Avoid second hand smoke. Smoke can make the flu worse.

When to Seek Emergency Medical Care

You need to seek emergency medical care if you or someone in your care has any of the following symptoms:

- A temperature over 104°F (40°C)
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Severe vomiting
- Dehydration

For more information on influenza speak with your health care provider or contact:

www.albertahealthservices.ca/influenza

Health Link Alberta:
Toll-free: 1-866-408-5465 (LINK)
Edmonton: 780-408-5465 (LINK)