



Influenza Vaccine 2014/2015

The information in this fact sheet refers to the publicly funded influenza vaccine provided at health unit clinics. This year's vaccine protects against three strains of influenza; two A strains and one B strain:

- pandemic 2009 influenza A (H1N1),
- a strain of influenza A (H3N2) and
- a B strain

The National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) in Canada states that a newer vaccine nasal spray (Flumist®) seems to provide more protection in healthy children two to five years old and is preferred. Unfortunately, this vaccine is not currently publicly funded in Ontario. Flumist® costs about \$30 per dose and can be purchased at some pharmacies and given by your healthcare provider. The vaccine given in the arm that is offered at SMDHU clinics is free, safe and still works very well to prevent influenza infection in children. If you would like more information on Flumist®, please talk to your healthcare provider.

What is Influenza?

Influenza (commonly known as "the flu") is a potentially serious respiratory infection caused by influenza A and B viruses. In Canada influenza generally occurs each year in the late fall and winter months. People who get influenza usually feel quite unwell, and can experience sudden onset of 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.

People of any age can get influenza and most people will recover within a week or ten days. Some individuals, especially those 65 years of age and older and adults or children with chronic conditions, are at greater risk for more severe complications, such as pneumonia and hospitalization. Symptoms such as cough and fatigue can persist for several weeks, making the return to full activity difficult.

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.

Who should get the influenza vaccine?

Influenza vaccine is recommended and available free of charge in Ontario for all persons 6 months of age and older.

NACI specifically recommends influenza vaccine for the following high risk groups:

- Persons at high risk for influenza-related complications, including those with heart, kidney, or lung disorders, diabetes mellitus, cancer, immune compromising conditions, obesity, residents of nursing homes & other chronic care facilities, all people ≥65 years of age, all children 6 to 59 months of age, pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy, and Aboriginal peoples.
- Persons capable of transmitting influenza to those at high risk, including health care providers and persons who provide care to children ≤ 5 years of age.
- Persons who provide essential community services.

How well does the vaccine work?

When there is a good match between the influenza strains in the vaccine and those circulating in the community, the vaccine can prevent influenza illness in about 60-80% of healthy children and adults. Studies have shown that influenza immunization decreases the frequency of physician visits, hospitalization and death in high risk persons.

It takes about two weeks after receiving influenza vaccine for your body 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. The vaccine will not protect against colds and other respiratory illnesses that may be mistaken for influenza.

Who should not get the influenza vaccine?

- Infants under six months of age (the current vaccine is not recommended for this age group).
- Anyone who has a severe allergy to any component of the vaccine, with the exception of egg. Your health care provider can tell you which components are in the specific vaccine. Some vaccines contain small quantities of antibiotics or preservatives.

While egg is used in the manufacturing process for flu vaccine, recent studies have shown that egg-allergic people can be vaccinated.

- Anyone who had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the influenza vaccine.
- Anyone who developed Guillain Barré Syndrome (GBS), a rare neurological condition, within 6 weeks of a previous influenza immunization.

- Anyone with a moderate to severe acute illness with fever or just started on medication (i.e. antibiotics), should delay immunization until they are feeling better. People with a mild illness (i.e. a cold) with or without a fever can be immunized.
- Immunization should generally be delayed in individuals with an evolving neurological disorder, until their condition has been stabilized.

How many doses of the influenza vaccine are needed?

Because the circulating influenza viruses change often and the vaccine only reliably provides protection for one influenza season, it is necessary to get immunized every year. Adults and children, who have received seasonal influenza vaccine before, only need one dose each season.

Children less than 9 years of age receiving seasonal influenza vaccine for the first time are recommended to have two doses at least 4 weeks apart.

Can the vaccine cause influenza?

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

What are the potential risks and side effects from influenza vaccine?

Like any medicine, the influenza vaccine is capable of causing side effects, most of which are mild. The risk of the influenza vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small. The risk of getting the flu and suffering serious complications is much greater.

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.

Acetaminophen or ibuprofen may be taken to reduce discomfort or fever following immunization. Always follow package directions. Acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) must not be given to children under 18 years of age.

Guillain-Barré Syndrome (or GBS)

GBS is a rare disorder where a person's own immune system damages nerve cells, causing muscle weakness and sometimes paralysis. It most commonly occurs following gastrointestinal, respiratory, or other infections, including influenza infection. On very rare occasions, an individual may develop GBS in days or weeks following an immunization. However, just because the person develops GBS does not automatically mean that the vaccine caused GBS.

Studies have shown the absolute risk of GBS in the period following influenza immunization is about one excess case per 1 million flu vaccines administered above the background rate of GBS in the general population.

However, influenza immunization may actually protect you somewhat from GBS, as the risk of GBS, if you were infected with influenza infection itself, is estimated to be 10 times the risk from influenza vaccination.

Oculorespiratory Syndrome (ORS)

During the 2000-2001 season, a small number of people who received influenza vaccine developed a side effect called Oculorespiratory Syndrome (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 symptom in the past may safely be 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.

Is there an alternative to the vaccine?

Annual influenza immunization is the most effective way to prevent influenza. However, the following are also always recommended to help reduce the spread of disease:

- Covering the nose and mouth during coughing or sneezing.
- Hand washing thoroughly by rubbing all parts of the hands with soap and water for at least 15 seconds.

When should I seek medical attention?

Call your health care provider, go to the nearest hospital or call 911 if any of the following occur within three days of getting the vaccine:

- High fever (over 40C or 104F)
- Hives
- Swelling of the face or mouth
- Trouble breathing
- Crying for several hours
- Very pale colour and serious drowsiness
- Convulsions or seizures
- Any other unexpected effects

If medical attention was required, please notify the health unit.

What else do I need to know?

If you are looking for more information about influenza or influenza vaccine, please contact Your Health Connection 705-721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520 to speak with a nurse or visit our website at www.simcoemuskokahealth.org