

Facts About Influenza for Adults

What is influenza?

Seasonal influenza (flu) is a contagious viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs that usually occurs in the fall and winter months and can cause severe illness. In the Northern Hemisphere, influenza occurs during December-March, but activity can occur as early as October and as late as May occasionally, but usually in limited areas. Influenza is thought to be spread from person to person, primarily when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Influenza may lead to hospitalization or even death, especially among the elderly. On average, each year between 5% and 20 % of the population contract influenza, more than 200,000 are hospitalized and 36,000 die from seasonal influenza-related complications annually. There is a new different flu virus spreading among people called novel H1N1 flu. The novel H1N1 vaccine is not intended to replace the seasonal flu vaccine--it is intended to be used along-side seasonal flu vaccine.

Prevention

Getting a seasonal flu vaccine is the best way to prevent influenza. The time to vaccinate is as soon as vaccine is available and throughout the influenza season. Because the flu vaccine is updated every year to keep up with changes in circulation flu viruses and because immunity to influenza viruses declines within a year after vaccination, it is important to get vaccinated against influenza every year.

Symptoms

Typical seasonal influenza illness is characterized by the abrupt onset of fever, chills, cough, headache, runny nose, sore throat, and muscle and joint pain. Unlike other common respiratory infections that are often called "the flu", influenza can cause more severe illness that can result in complications leading to hospitalization and death. However, persons with mild symptoms such as a cough and mild fever can also have an infection with influenza virus, and symptoms can be similar to those caused by other respiratory viruses. Persons with mild symptoms can still transmit influenza virus to others, including to persons at risk for more severe influenza virus infections.

Who should get influenza vaccine?

- Persons 50 years of age or older
- Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities
- Persons who have chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, hematological or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus)
- Persons who have immunosuppression (including immunosuppression caused by medications or by human immunodeficiency virus)
- Persons who have any condition (e.g. cognitive dysfunction, spinal cord injuries, seizure disorders, or other neuromuscular disorders) that can compromise respiratory function or the handling of respiratory secretions or that can increase the risk of aspiration
- Household contacts and caregivers of children younger than 5 years of age and adults 50 years of age and older, with particular emphasis on vaccinating contacts of children younger than 6 months of age
- Household contacts and caregivers of persons with medical conditions that put them at high risk for severe complications from influenza; and
- Health care personnel.

Who should not get influenza vaccine?

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination
- People who developed Guillain-Barre' syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine
- People who have a moderate-to-severe illness with a fever (they should wait until they recover to get vaccinated).

Vaccine Safety

Injected vaccine--The injected vaccine can be given to persons 6 months of age or older. It is usually given as a shot in the upper arm or in the thigh. There may be some soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site which may last 1 to 2 days. Other possible side effects include a headache and low-grade fever for a day after vaccination. Intranasal vaccine--The intranasal vaccine can be given to healthy persons 2 to 49 years of age, but should not be given to persons with chronic medical conditions. In addition, it should not be given to pregnant women or to persons who are in close contact with severely immune-suppressed persons. There may be a runny nose, headache, low-grade fever, sore throat, fatigue or cough after vaccination.

This above information was gathered from the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases at www.nfid.org August 2009.