

Flu Vaccine

Many times “the flu” or **influenza** can be a major annoyance, keeping you home from work or school and making you feel awful. For some people, it can cause complications that are life-threatening. This is the reason certain people should make sure they receive a vaccination for influenza each year before the start of the flu season.

We know that children need to stay up to date on their immunizations. Adults should make sure they are up to

date on theirs, as well. Older adults, for example, should be immunized against flu, pneumococcal disease (pneumonia, for instance), tetanus, and diphtheria. Ask your doctor which immunizations he or she recommends for your particular situation.

An article in the October 4, 2000, issue of *JAMA* discusses how vaccinating children in day care reduced the likelihood of getting influenza for people who live with these children.

WHO SHOULD RECEIVE A FLU VACCINATION?

- People who are 50 years of age or older
- People who live in long-term care facilities (like nursing homes) who have chronic medical conditions
- People who have a health problem such as heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, asthma, or diabetes
- People who have weakened immune systems, such as people living with HIV/AIDS or other disorders of the immune system, people receiving long-term treatment with certain drugs that affect the immune system, and people receiving cancer treatment with radiation or drugs that affect the immune system
- Anyone who is 6 months to 18 years of age receiving long-term treatment with aspirin because they could develop Reye syndrome if they catch influenza
- Women who will be past the third month of their pregnancy during the influenza season (in the United States the influenza season is roughly November through April)
- Health care workers and others (such as doctors, nurses, or their family members) who may come into close contact with people at risk of having influenza

Symptoms	Flu	Cold
Fever	Characteristic, high (102-104°F); lasts 3-4 days	Rare
Headache	Prominent	Rare
General Aches, Pains	Usual; often severe	Slight
Fatigue, Weakness	Can last up to 2-3 weeks	Quite mild
Extreme Exhaustion	Early and prominent	Never
Stuffy Nose	Sometimes	Common
Sneezing	Sometimes	Usual
Sore Throat	Sometimes	Common
Chest Discomfort, Cough	Common; can become severe	Mild to moderate; hacking cough

Adapted from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (www.niaid.nih.gov/publications/cold/sick.htm)

Additional Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, American Lung Association, National Institute on Aging, The AMA Family Medical Guide

Brian Pace, MA, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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WHAT IS INFLUENZA?

Influenza is a highly contagious infection caused by a virus. The virus infects the nose, throat, and lungs. Influenza usually causes fever, chills, a dry cough, headache, body aches, and fatigue. Gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea are rare in adults with influenza. What people call the “stomach flu” is actually caused by another virus. Influenza is a more serious condition than a cold and can be life-threatening for some people, so it is important to be vaccinated if you are at risk.

HOW OFTEN DO I NEED TO RECEIVE AN INFLUENZA VACCINATION?

The type of influenza virus can change from year to year. Therefore, you will need to be vaccinated every year. Each year health officials try to anticipate the particular strain of influenza that people will most likely encounter. You will be vaccinated against that particular virus, but you may come in contact with another type of influenza virus and contract that type of influenza.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Immunization Program Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
800 232-2522 (English),
800 232-0233 (Spanish)
or www.cdc.gov/nip/
- The American Lung Association
800/LUNG-USA or
www.lungusa.org

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To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

