

Family Health Care

Counselor

Getting Your Flu Shot

It's estimated that 60% of Canadians don't get flu shots annually. Flu shots produce antibodies to flu viruses, but because flu viruses change each year, annual flu shots are needed to give immunity to the current viruses. Getting a flu shot protects you against the flu and also helps prevent spreading it to others.



Your Health During Flu Season

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Spreading the Flu

The influenza virus is transmitted from person to person by "droplet" spread. The droplets from coughs and sneezes contain the viruses and when others come into contact with or breathe in these droplets they are at risk of catching the infection. Sneezes generally contain more viruses than coughs; however, either may cause droplets to spread anywhere from three to six feet from the infected person.

The influenza virus is also spread through contact with contaminated objects. Covering coughs or sneezes with a hand will contaminate your hand. Thus, one can be exposed through contaminated door knobs, computer key boards, telephones, and shopping carts. The virus enters the body when people touch their eyes, mouth, or nose with a contaminated hand. Spread through contaminated objects can also occur when you share objects such as cups, spoons, forks, and toothbrushes with an infected person.

A person can spread the virus from about one day before flu symptoms show and continue to spread it for five to seven days after becoming sick. If the symptoms are mild, one may not even realize they have influenza and are spreading it.

Here are some suggestions to prevent the spread of influenza and reduce your risk of contracting the flu:

- If you have the flu, stay home; going to work, school, or even social events means you could spread the virus.
- Cover all coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Dispose of all used tissues - don't reuse them, and don't share them with anyone else.
- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into the inside of your elbow.
- Avoid touching potentially contaminated objects, and don't share any of your own potentially contaminated objects with others.
- Avoid direct skin-to-skin contact such as kissing and hand shaking.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after coughing, sneezing or contact with any potentially contaminated object; wash all hand surfaces for about the time it takes you to recite the alphabet.
- If you are not able to wash your hands, clean them with an alcohol based hand sanitizer.

Avoid touching your face as the influenza virus can enter your body through the eyes, nose and mouth.

The Signs and Symptoms of the Flu

The flu, or influenza, affects about 10-25% of the Canadian population each year. After exposure to the virus, it takes about 48 hours to develop the symptoms. The flu can consist of some or all of the following symptoms:

- Chills and shivering.
- A sudden fever which can be as high as 38-40 degrees Celsius.
- Generalized aches and pains; just feeling "awful".
- Fatigue and weakness.
- Headache.
- A sore throat.
- A cough which is usually dry and non-productive, meaning you don't cough up anything.
- A runny nose and/or watery eyes.
- Gastro intestinal symptoms like nausea and/or vomiting, especially in children.



In two to three days, the symptoms lessen but it can take about 10 days for all the symptoms to clear up. If you are bothered for longer than 10 days, or your symptoms do not seem to improve, you may have another type of infection and need have it checked by a doctor.

Treating the Flu

There is no cure for influenza, rather the aim of treatment is to reduce the symptoms and improve your comfort. Thus, taking preventative action in getting a flu shot is the best bet in avoiding the illness. However, here are some ways to improve your comfort if you already have the flu:

- Bed rest gives your body time to fight the virus and prevent spread to family and friends.
- Drinking plenty of fluids, such as water, soup or fruit juices helps keep you hydrated.
- A hot bath or shower will also increase your hydration, as will a room humidifier.
- Heating pads and cool compresses can provide relief.

Antibiotics are never recommended for influenza because they work against bacteria, not viruses; using them incorrectly can contribute to antibiotic resistance. However, if the influenza persists, a bacterial infection may also be present and then you may have antibiotics prescribed.

Antiviral drugs are available such as oseltamivir and zanamivir. They both work by reducing the ability of the influenza virus to **multiply**. However, both must be taken within the first 48 hours of flu symptoms because after that period of time, the virus numbers are too great for either drug to have an effect.

During the flu, one can take acetaminophen as it will reduce aches, pains and fever. However, avoid acetylsalicylic acid (ASA), especially in children and teenagers, because of its link to the rare but deadly nervous system condition, Reye's syndrome.

Your Health During Flu Season

The Flu Shot

The flu is caused by three general groups of viruses: A, B, and C. Influenza A and B are most common in humans, and A seems to be responsible for the majority of outbreaks. Influenza B has milder symptoms, but can be more deadly. In a flu shot, a small amount of inactive viral material is injected into your body, which then stimulates the body's immune system to manufacture antibodies to the virus. Thus, when you are exposed at a later time, the antibodies will combat the virus and you will either avoid getting the flu, or have milder symptoms.

When viruses enter the human body, they attach themselves to cells and use the resources of these "host" cells to multiply; this is the process that causes the symptoms of influenza. Influenza viruses are simple organisms which can adapt and change readily to their environment. Thus, the influenza virus that caused the flu last year may not have the same genetic make-up as this year's. Each year, researchers work to identify the active influenza viruses and develop a flu shot that will work against them. This means you need to get a flu shot each and every year.

The flu season in Canada is considered to start in November and end in April; thus, the ideal time to receive flu shots is prior to the flu season, in October. It takes about two weeks for the flu shots to become effective and their length of effectiveness is six months. Flu shots provide 70-90% coverage. For the elderly or people with existing medical conditions, the coverage can be less but is still about 40-60%. If you miss getting a flu shot prior to flu season, it's still a good idea to get the shot because it will still give you some protection against the virus.

No Reason to not get a Flu Shot

About 60% of Canadians who should get a flu shot, don't, and the reasons for this are numerous. Often, the individual doesn't believe themselves to be in a high risk group. Alternatively, they may not think they have time, or do not like injections. Some people believe that influenza is just a bad cold, but while both are viral infections, they are caused by different viruses.

People may believe that they don't need a flu shot; however, if they have any chronic health conditions, are health care professionals or are household contacts of high risk individuals, they should get a flu shot. Some people don't want to get a flu shot because they believe that the vaccine causes the flu. However, the symptoms that they may be mistaking the flu for may be caused by another infection such as a cold, or even the pain associated with the injection itself.

None of these are valid reasons to avoid the shot. If you don't usually get the flu, it is no guarantee you will remain immune. About 20% of Canadians have influenza each year.

Get The Shot; Not The Flu!



Who Should get a Flu Shot

It's estimated that anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 Canadians die each year from influenza or its complications like pneumonia. Those people at greatest risk for complications should get an annual flu shot, as should individuals who take care of these people. While specific criteria may vary from province to province, annual flu shots are generally recommended for:

- Individuals 65 years and older as they have a greater chance of having chronic conditions. At their age, their immune systems may not work as well as they once did.
- Individuals six months to four years as their immune systems may not be fully developed.
- Anyone with a chronic health condition such as asthma, diabetes, anemia, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease, and/or obesity.
- Children who take acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) for conditions like juvenile rheumatoid arthritis.
- Pregnant women.
- Anyone with a compromised immune system, for example, a person taking anti-rejection drugs after an organ transplant or who has an HIV infection.
- People taking care of anyone at risk for influenza complications.
- Residents living in personal care homes or group homes as influenza can spread rapidly.
- Health care professionals including first responders.

Flu shots are not recommended for some individuals including:

- People with an egg allergy as flu vaccines are manufactured using eggs.
- Children less than six months of age because the flu shot can actually cause influenza in an underdeveloped immune system.
- Individuals with a history of the nervous system condition Guillain-Barre syndrome as they may experience a worsening or recurrence of the condition with a flu shot.

People who are sick with a temperature will need to recover before having a flu shot.

Ask Your Helpful FHCP Pharmacist

Provided by Marie Berry, Your
Family Health Care Pharmacist

Q. Are disinfectant wipes good for preventing the spread of influenza viruses?

A. Yes, anything that will clean the surface of objects that could be contaminated with the virus is a good idea. You want to wipe off the surface, not just "push around" anything that could be contaminating objects. Remember to use the wipes just once, and dispose of them. The influenza virus can live up to 48 hours on surfaces; thus, isolating hard-to-clean surfaces such as computer key boards may be an alternative. Household disinfectants used according to their instructions will work as well; use disposable cloths or paper towels to avoid re-contaminating a surface.

Q. Are there any natural remedies for the flu?

A. Various substances are promoted for treating the flu such as antioxidants like vitamin C, zinc, garlic, and ginger which are supposed to help boost immunity. Unfortunately, researchers have not been able to show that natural remedies have an effect on the influenza virus. However, some treatments for the symptoms of the flu could be considered natural remedies such as increased fluid intake of water, soup and or fruit juice.

Q. I'm nursing my baby; can I still get a flu shot?

A. Yes, it is recommended that both nursing mothers and pregnant women get a flu shot. The flu shot does not negatively affect the mother, nursing child or developing baby; it will not alter the body's ability to make antibodies. It makes sense for mothers to get a flu shot because their babies will be too young (under six months) to receive their own flu shot and so mothers do not have to run the risk of having the flu and potentially infecting their baby.

A Healthy Position Influenza Virus Chemistry

Viruses are small parasites that depend on your body's cells to multiply. They range in size from 10 to 300 microns (a period in a sentence is about 615 microns for reference), so are too small to be seen without a powerful microscope. Viruses have an outer protein covering containing genetic material which also contains some lipids or fat. When you breathe in the influenza virus it attaches to cells in your lungs, injects its genetic material into the cells, and uses the cells' resources to multiply.

Influenza viruses contain two types of proteins on their surface covering: hemagglutinin (H) and neuroaminidase (N). The types are used to name the viruses, for example H1N1. Viruses change genetically in order to survive and these changes are readily seen because of their short life spans. These changes account for each year's different genetic variation of influenza virus and the need for an annual flu shot.

Spread of the influenza virus can be local or widespread. Factors like migrating birds and people traveling by plane contribute to wide geographic spread. Each year, the flu season seems to occur in two waves. First with children and their contacts, and then with the elderly and their contacts.

Take The Check-Up Challenge

Brush up on your hand washing technique: use soap and water to scrub all your hand surfaces; a nail brush can help remove debris from under your fingernails; rinse well; and dry using a clean towel. Take the time to wash properly, and wash often.

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Next Month's Feature!

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Tracking Diabetes

Over 20 million Canadians have diabetes, type 1 and type 2, and this number is increasing every year. Type 1 is also known as insulin dependent diabetes and largely affects younger people while type 2 generally affects older people. Learn the risks associated with diabetes and take steps to control them.

In Next Month's Feature Find Out More About:

- The changes that occur with diabetes.
- Risk factors for diabetes.
- Complications of diabetes.
- Lifestyle changes for diabetes.
- Drug therapy.
- Tracking diabetes.

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