

# Influenza Immunization for Pregnant Women, Breastfeeding Women, and Families with Newborns

## What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that is caused by a virus. Influenza can happen any time during the year, but it is most common in the winter.

## How is influenza spread?

Influenza is easily spread when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or even talks. This releases the virus into the air to be breathed in by others. People can also be exposed to the virus when they touch something that carries the virus (e.g., hands, objects) and then touch their eyes or nose. Influenza can be spread before symptoms start.

## How serious is influenza?

Most people who get sick with influenza will get better. But influenza causes more than 12,000 hospitalizations and 3,500 deaths in Canada each year. Pneumonia is the most common complication of influenza, and influenza can make other health problems worse. Even healthy, young people can get very sick and die from influenza.

## What are the symptoms of influenza?

The symptoms of influenza start suddenly and may include fever, sore throat, runny nose, cough, headache, muscle aches, loss of appetite, and feeling tired. Vomiting and diarrhea can happen but are more common in children.

## How can influenza be prevented?

- **Get the influenza vaccine.** Getting the influenza vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and other people from getting sick. You need the immunization every year because the influenza viruses change. A new vaccine is made each year to protect against the viruses that are most likely to cause illness in that year. The best time for you and your family to be immunized is in October or November. But people can be immunized at any time in the influenza season (usually October to March).

- **Wash your hands** often with warm water and soap or use an alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitizer).
- **Cover your cough or sneeze into your arm** or a tissue, not your hand.
- **Stay home** when you are sick.

## Who should get influenza vaccine?

All Albertans 6 months and older should get the influenza vaccine. Influenza vaccine is especially important for pregnant women who are at a higher risk of developing complications from influenza. It is also important to be immunized if you could spread influenza to people at high risk of influenza-related complications (e.g., infants less than 6 months of age who are too young to be immunized). This includes parents, grandparents, siblings, and anyone else who cares for your infant.

## I am pregnant. Should I get immunized against influenza?

Yes. Immunization can occur at any time while you are pregnant. You should be immunized against influenza as you are at higher risk for serious complications from influenza.

- If you become infected with influenza while pregnant, you are at higher risk of being admitted to hospital. The illness may cause a problem for your baby (e.g., premature birth).
- Getting the influenza vaccine will protect you and your baby while you are pregnant. The protection you get from the vaccine while you are pregnant may transfer across the placenta and remain with your baby for a short time after birth.
- Babies born to women who are immunized against influenza are less likely to be born premature, be small for their gestational age, or have a low birth weight.

## How else can I protect myself and my baby?

To further protect you and your baby, make sure everyone around you is also immunized against influenza, especially those who live in your home.

## Is it safe to get the influenza vaccine while pregnant?

Yes. Recent studies have shown no harm to pregnant women or their babies when mothers get the influenza vaccine during pregnancy.

- The injectable (needle) influenza vaccine is inactivated, which means the virus in the vaccine has been killed and cannot cause influenza. This is the vaccine recommended for pregnant women.
- The live nasal spray influenza vaccine is NOT recommended for pregnant women. If a family member or someone who often has contact with you and your baby gets the live nasal spray influenza vaccine, there is no risk to you or your baby.

## I am breastfeeding. Should I get immunized against influenza?

Yes. As a new mother, you are busy taking care of your baby and possibly older children. It is important that you take care of yourself by being immunized. There is no risk to getting the influenza vaccine while you are breastfeeding. Both the injectable and the live nasal spray influenza vaccine are safe to get when breastfeeding.

## I have a baby less than 6 months of age. How can I protect them from influenza?

Babies less than 6 months of age cannot get the influenza vaccine. The best way to protect your baby is to encourage everyone who has contact with them to be immunized against influenza. People who have influenza may not have symptoms but they can still spread the disease. It is not enough for people to stay away while they are sick—encourage them to be immunized.

## For More Information

-  Call Health Link at **811**
-  Go to [immunizealberta.ca](http://immunizealberta.ca)
-  Go to [myhealth.alberta.ca](http://myhealth.alberta.ca)
-  Go to [ahs.ca/influenza/influenza.aspx](http://ahs.ca/influenza/influenza.aspx)

