

## Influenza Facts

Influenza, commonly known as “the flu”, infects 10 to 20% of Canadians every year. Having the flu can result in missing work and/or school, visits to the doctor or emergency room, increased hospitalizations for pneumonia, and deaths. The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care provides free flu vaccine for all those over 6 months of age who live, work or attend school in Ontario.

Influenza is a serious respiratory disease caused by a virus. It spreads easily through coughing and sneezing. It can also spread through direct contact with surfaces contaminated by the flu virus. While some symptoms may be cold-like, the flu can be far more serious, causing fever, chills, cough, sore throat, headache and body aches. Although the fever may go away on the second or third day of illness, it may take up to six weeks to feel better. Most people recover fully, but the flu can lead to more serious illnesses such as pneumonia. Complications are more common in young children, the elderly and those who have chronic medical conditions.

## The Influenza Vaccine

In order to provide the most effective protection, the vaccine must contain part of the virus itself, but the virus used is dead and cannot give you the flu. Each year the content of the flu vaccine is changed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to protect against the strains that are expected to circulate across the world. The 2012-2013 seasonal influenza vaccines can protect against the equivalent strains of A/California/7/2009(H1N1)pdm09-like, A/Victoria/361/2011 (H3N2)-like, and B/Wisconsin/1/2010-like flu viruses.

With a good match between the vaccine and the circulating strain, the vaccine is 80% effective in preventing influenza infection in healthy adults. For children, the vaccine is about 60-80% effective in preventing the influenza. The vaccine is somewhat less effective in preventing influenza in the elderly. However, the vaccine can prevent pneumonia, hospitalization and death seniors.

Each year you need to receive the new vaccine to be effectively protected against the flu. Protection from the vaccine is achieved two weeks after the injection and may last six months or longer. For those who receive the vaccine and still get the flu, it is usually milder than it would have been without the vaccine. Children less than nine (9) years of age need two (2) doses of seasonal flu vaccine, given at least four (4) weeks apart, if they haven't had a seasonal flu vaccine before. The flu vaccine is considered safe during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

## Who should not get the influenza vaccine?

The following persons should not get the flu vaccine:

- Infants under 6 months of age
- Anyone who has a severe allergy to eggs
- Anyone allergic to Triton® X-100, neomycin, thimerosal or formaldehyde (for **Vaxigrip®**)
- Anyone allergic to chicken proteins, neomycin, kanamycin, formaldehyde, polysorbate 80 or CTAB (cetyltrimethylammonium bromide) (for **Agriflu®**)
- Anyone allergic to formaldehyde, sodium deoxycholate, sucrose and thimerosal (for **Fluviral®**)
- Anyone who has had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the flu vaccine
- Anyone who is ill and has a fever, until he/she is feeling better

**In addition to the above, the following persons will not be given the flu vaccine at a clinic and will be referred to their physician:**

- Anyone with a history of Guillain-Barré Syndrome within 6 weeks of a previous flu vaccine
- Anyone with a history of Oculo-Respiratory Syndrome following receipt of seasonal flu vaccine, where it was severe enough to result in hospitalization

## What are the possible side effects of the influenza vaccine?

Most people have no reactions to the vaccine, or mild reactions that last 1-3 days such as:

- Soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site
- Low grade fever, headache and muscle aches; extra rest, plenty of fluids and acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol™) will help ease these symptoms.

Severe side effects and allergic reactions are very rare. Oculorespiratory syndrome (ORS) is an unusual side effect reported in past years, causing red eyes and/or swelling of the face and/or coughing, wheezing or difficult breathing. Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) is a rare condition that can result in weakness and paralysis of the body's muscles. It most commonly occurs after infection but in rare cases can also occur after some vaccines. GBS may be associated with influenza vaccine in about 1 per million recipients.

At the time of year that the vaccine is given, many viruses are making people sick. Infection with these viruses may be mistaken for a reaction to the flu vaccine.