

Why seniors should get the inactivated influenza (flu) vaccine

What should seniors know about the inactivated influenza vaccine?

Influenza vaccines are a safe and effective way to help people stay healthy, prevent illness and even save lives. As people age, they may be at much higher risk of severe disease and complications from influenza. For this reason, seniors aged 65 years and older are advised to get an inactivated influenza vaccine each year. The vaccine is available at no charge. You can find information on booking an appointment to get immunized on the Government of British Columbia's website at www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/immunizations/flu.

The inactivated influenza vaccine is safe. It contains killed influenza viruses or parts of the viruses that cannot cause influenza. Common reactions to the vaccine include redness, soreness or swelling where the vaccine was given.

Mild symptoms may occur in some people after getting the vaccine, especially those receiving the vaccine for the first time. Symptoms can include fever, headache, aching muscles and fatigue that may last 1 to 2 days. These symptoms are less severe and last a shorter time compared to influenza infection.

When should seniors get the influenza vaccine?

It is important for seniors to get the influenza vaccine before the influenza season starts.

In B.C., the influenza vaccines are usually available beginning in October. For best protection, you should try to get the vaccine as soon as possible. This gives your body enough time, about 2 weeks, to build immunity before the influenza season starts. This immunity

typically lasts through the influenza season, which usually ends in April.

In addition to the influenza vaccine, seniors should be immunized against pneumococcal disease. The pneumococcal vaccine protects against infections of the brain, bloodstream, lungs and ear. It is safe to get the influenza and pneumococcal vaccines at the same time. Most people only need 1 dose of pneumococcal vaccine in their life and will not need a booster dose.

For information about pneumococcal infection and the vaccine, see [HealthLinkBC File #62b Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine](#).

Influenza immunization for caregivers and household contacts

Influenza immunization is strongly encouraged for family members, caregivers and household contacts of seniors.

Who should not get the influenza vaccine?

Speak with a health care provider if you:

- Have had a life-threatening reaction to a previous dose of influenza vaccine, or any part of the vaccine. People with egg allergies can be safely immunized with the influenza vaccine
- Have had severe oculo-respiratory syndrome (red eyes and a cough and/or sore throat and/or hoarseness) after getting an influenza vaccine
- Developed Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) within 8 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine without another cause being identified

GBS is a rare condition that can result in weakness and paralysis of the body's muscles. It

most commonly occurs after infections. In rare cases, GBS can also occur after some vaccines. GBS may be associated with influenza vaccine in about 1 per million recipients.

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the respiratory system caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms can include fever, headache, muscle pain, runny nose, sore throat, extreme tiredness and cough.

Symptoms can begin about 1 to 4 days, or an average of 2 days, after you are first exposed to the influenza virus. Fever and other symptoms usually last 7 to 10 days, but the cough and weakness may last 1 to 2 weeks longer.

Although infections from other viruses may have similar symptoms, those due to the influenza virus tend to be worse with a greater risk of complications.

How can influenza be prevented?

You can reduce the risk of getting influenza and spreading it to others by:

- Getting an influenza vaccine
- Staying home when you are ill
- Washing your hands regularly
- Cleaning and disinfecting objects and surfaces that people touch
- Promptly disposing of used tissues in the waste basket or garbage
- Coughing and sneezing into your shirt sleeve rather than your hands

How does influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from person-to-person through coughing, sneezing or having face-to-face contact. The virus can also spread if you touch tiny droplets from a cough or sneeze on another person or object, and then touch your own eyes, mouth or nose before washing your hands. You can spread the influenza virus even before feeling sick. An adult can spread the virus from about 1 day before to 5 days after symptoms start. Young children and people with weakened immune systems may be able to spread the virus for a longer period of time.

How serious is influenza?

In addition to making you sick, sometimes severely, influenza also reduces the body's ability to fight other infections. Bacterial pneumonia, an infection of the lungs, is the most common complication from influenza, especially in elderly people. Influenza can also lead to more complications for people who have heart, lung or other health conditions. These complications can sometimes be fatal.

For more information

For more information, see the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #12b Facts about influenza \(the flu\)](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #12c Influenza \(flu\) immunization: Myths and facts](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #12d Inactivated influenza \(flu\) vaccine](#)



BC Centre for Disease Control
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