

## Influenza (flu) immunization: Myths and facts

The influenza virus can cause serious illness and even death. Influenza vaccines are a safe and effective way to help people stay healthy. The vaccines can prevent influenza and its complications and even save lives.

The influenza vaccines available in B.C. are either inactivated or live attenuated vaccines. The inactivated influenza vaccine is made of killed influenza viruses or parts of the viruses and is given by injection. The live attenuated influenza vaccine is made from weakened influenza viruses and is given as a nasal spray.

Many people use the term “flu” to refer to any illness, such as the common cold or stomach flu. However, the influenza virus causes a respiratory illness that tends to be more severe and is more likely to cause respiratory and other complications.

### Myths and facts about influenza and influenza immunization

**Myth:** Influenza is not a serious illness.

**Fact:** In years when influenza is widespread in B.C., hundreds of people may die from influenza or its complications, such as pneumonia. Influenza can lead to serious illness in seniors 65 years and older and in other high risk groups.

**Myth:** I have never had influenza, so I do not need to get an influenza vaccine.

**Fact:** Symptoms of influenza can vary from mild to severe. Most people can get sick with influenza several times during their lives because the virus changes over time. Getting an influenza vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and others from complications due to severe illness caused by influenza.

**Myth:** The influenza vaccines can give me influenza.

**Fact:** The inactivated influenza vaccine cannot give you influenza. The vaccine contains killed influenza viruses or parts of the viruses that cannot cause infection.

The live attenuated influenza vaccine contains weakened influenza viruses. Common reactions to the live vaccine include mild symptoms such as a runny nose, nasal congestion, cough, sore throat and fever. These symptoms are less severe than those from influenza infection and do not last as long.

As a precaution, people with weakened immune systems should not get the live vaccine.

**Myth:** The influenza vaccines cause severe reactions or side effects.

**Fact:** The influenza vaccines are safe. Most people who get the inactivated influenza vaccine only have redness, soreness or swelling where the vaccine was given. Some people, especially those who get the vaccine for the first time, may have a headache, muscle aches or tiredness. People who receive the live attenuated influenza vaccine may have mild influenza symptoms as described above.

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 infections. In rare cases, GBS can also occur after some vaccines. GBS is extremely rare after the influenza vaccine (about one person in one million). The risk of GBS is much higher from influenza infection.

**Myth:** Getting an influenza vaccine every year weakens my immune system.

**Fact:** Getting an influenza vaccine every year does not weaken your immune system. Because the influenza virus strains change most years, you need to get immunized each year to be protected against new strains. People who get

the vaccine each year are better protected than those who remain unimmunized.

**Myth:** I should not get an influenza vaccine because I have allergies.

**Fact:** The influenza vaccines are safe for most people with allergies. However, if you had a severe allergic reaction to a previous dose of influenza vaccine or any part of the vaccine, talk to your health care provider. You may need to be tested for allergies before being immunized. People with egg allergies can be safely immunized.

**Myth:** The influenza vaccines protect against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses.

**Fact:** Influenza vaccines do not protect against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses, often called the stomach flu. The influenza virus is a respiratory virus and is very different and typically causes more severe illness than the viruses that cause the common cold or the stomach flu. Influenza vaccines only protect against the viruses that cause influenza.

**Myth:** The vaccines do not work because I still get influenza.

**Fact:** There are many different types of viruses that can cause influenza-like symptoms any time of the year, but these are not actually the influenza virus.

The influenza vaccines protect against the strains of influenza viruses expected to cause influenza during the influenza season. The vaccines do not protect against other viruses that cause similar illnesses, such as respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) or parainfluenza. Because the influenza virus strains in the vaccine change most years, you need to get immunized each year to be protected against new strains.

In older people and those with certain chronic health conditions, the vaccines may not prevent influenza completely but may decrease

symptoms, complications and the risk of dying from influenza.

**Myth:** I am pregnant and should not get an influenza vaccine.

**Fact:** The inactivated influenza vaccine given by injection is considered safe at any stage of pregnancy. People in the second half of pregnancy are at much higher risk of hospitalization due to influenza, especially those in the third trimester. As well, people at any stage of pregnancy with certain chronic health conditions are also at much higher risk of serious complications from influenza and should be immunized. Getting immunized while pregnant also helps to protect your baby from influenza until they are old enough to get the influenza vaccine at 6 month of age.

People who are pregnant, or trying to become pregnant, should not get the live attenuated influenza vaccine given as a nasal spray.

**Myth:** I should not get an influenza vaccine if I am breast/chestfeeding.

**Fact:** It is safe for babies to breast/chestfeed after you receive the influenza vaccine.

### For more information

For more information, visit:

- [HealthLinkBC File #12a Why seniors should get the inactivated influenza \(flu\) vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #12b Facts about influenza \(the flu\)](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #12d Inactivated influenza \(flu\) vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBCFile #12e Live attenuated influenza \(flu\) vaccine](#)



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