

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 higher risk of complications from influenza. For this reason, seniors age 65 years and older are advised to get an inactivated influenza vaccine, or flu shot, each year.

The inactivated influenza vaccine is provided free to seniors. Contact your health care provider to get your influenza vaccine.

The inactivated influenza vaccine is safe. It contains killed influenza viruses that cannot cause the flu. Common reactions to the vaccine include redness, soreness or swelling where the vaccine was given. These reactions may last 1 to 2 days.

Mild symptoms may occur in some people after being immunized, especially those receiving the vaccine for the first time. Symptoms can include fever, headache and aching muscles. They can start within 6 to 12 hours and end within 24 to 48 hours after the vaccine was given. 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 flu season starts.

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

season starts. This immunity typically lasts through the flu 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 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

Influenza immunization is encouraged and provided free 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 component of the vaccine. People with egg allergies can be safely immunized with the influenza vaccine
- Have had severe ocular-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 infection, but in rare cases 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 upper airway caused by the influenza virus.

Symptoms can include fever, headache, muscle pain, runny nose, sore throat, extreme tiredness, and cough. Although infections from other viruses may have similar symptoms, those due to the influenza virus tend to be worse.

How can influenza be prevented?

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

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

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 when a person touches tiny droplets from a cough or a sneeze on another person or object and then touches their own eyes, mouth or nose before washing their hands.

Symptoms can begin about 1 to 4 days, or an average of 2 days, after a person is 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.

An infected person 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?

Influenza reduces the body's ability to fight other infections. Bacterial pneumonia, which is 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](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #12e Live Attenuated Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#)

