

# INFLUENZA (FLU) AND INFLUENZA VACCINE

Updated September 2023

## What is influenza?

Influenza, commonly known as the flu, is a serious respiratory infection caused by influenza A and B viruses. It spreads quickly and easily from person to person and occurs each year in the late fall and winter months.

## What are the symptoms of the flu?

Symptoms of the flu are more severe than just the common cold and often include:

- High fever
- Chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Muscle aches
- Headache
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue

Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may also occur in children.

Most people recover from the flu within 5 to 10 days, but some including people 65 years of age and older, pregnant women and people with chronic health conditions (e.g., asthma, heart disease, diabetes, and others) are at greater risk of developing severe health problems such as pneumonia when ill with the flu that may require hospital care.

## How does the flu spread?

The flu easily spreads from person to person through coughing and sneezing (when droplets containing the flu are released into the air and then land on another person's face, mouth, and eyes). It also spreads through touching surfaces, unwashed hands, or objects such as phones and toys contaminated by the flu and touching your face, mouth, or eyes.

Adults infected with the flu can infect other people one day before they have symptoms and up to five days after becoming sick. Children and people with weakened immune systems may be able to spread the virus for even longer. If exposed to a person with flu, you may develop symptoms in one to four days.

## How can the flu be avoided?

- **Get the flu shot every year.** Flu shots are available in participating pharmacies, health care provider's offices, and at a designated York Region Public Health COVID-19 vaccine clinic (**by appointment only**)

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- Wash your hands well and often with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds. If soap and water are unavailable, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue out immediately. Wash your hands afterward. Cough in your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue
- Don't touch your face
- Stay home when you're sick
- Clean (and disinfect) surfaces and shared items

Be sure to eat healthy, keep active and get plenty of sleep to keep your immune system strong.

## Who should get the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine, commonly known as the flu shot, is recommended for all individuals six months of age and older who live, work or go to school in York Region. It is a safe and effective vaccine that is available in participating pharmacies, health care provider's offices, medical walk-in clinics and at designated York Region Public Health COVID-19 vaccine clinics (**by appointment only**).

## Can the flu vaccine be given with a COVID-19 vaccine?

Flu shots can also be safely given at the same time or any time before or after a COVID-19 vaccine for individuals six months and older.

## Who is at high risk of getting the flu?

Individuals who are at high risk of developing complications from the flu and for whom the flu vaccine is especially important for:

- Pregnant individuals (the vaccine is safe in pregnancy)
- People who are residents of long-term care homes or other congregate living settings
- People 65 years of age and older
- All children six months of age to five years of age
- First Nation, Inuit and Metis people
- Adults or children with chronic or immune compromising health conditions (e.g., asthma, heart disease, diabetes, and others)

Those who live with or have close contact with the high-risk groups listed above are a priority for getting the flu shot since they can spread the flu to high-risk people. They include:

- Those that live with people at high risk of flu-related complications
- Health care workers and other care providers in facilities and community settings
- People who provide care to children less than five years of age
- Individuals who provide services within closed or relatively closed settings to people at high risk (e.g., crew on a ship)

Health Canada also recommends people who provide essential community services and those in direct contact with poultry infection with avian influenza during culling operations get the flu shot.

## Facts about the seasonal flu vaccine

- The flu vaccine is a safe and effective way to protect you, your family and those around you from getting the flu
- The flu vaccine available for children six months and older will protect against four strains of flu viruses expected to spread during the current flu season
- Children aged 6 months to 9 years old getting the flu shot for the first time will need 2 doses of flu vaccine at least 4 weeks apart
- A high-dose flu vaccine is recommended for adults 65 years and older. If the high-dose vaccine is unavailable, it is recommended you receive a quadrivalent inactivated influenza vaccine (QIV) that will provide safe and effective protection
- People allergic to eggs can receive the flu vaccine
- Flu vaccine effectiveness can change each year depending on how well the vaccine strains match with circulating types/subtypes of influenza viruses and the health and age of the individual receiving a flu shot. Even when there is a less-than-ideal match or lower vaccine effectiveness against one strain, it is still important to get vaccinated and be protected
- **The influenza vaccine cannot cause the flu**

Getting the flu shot as early as possible is important as the influenza vaccine takes nearly two weeks to take full effect.

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

Most people will not have any side effects. Some people may experience soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site, fever or muscle aches. These symptoms are usually mild and will go away in a few days. Serious side effects are very rare.

If an allergic reaction is going to occur, it may happen within several minutes to several hours of receiving the flu shot. You should stay at the clinic for 15 minutes after getting the flu vaccine so the nurse can watch for any immediate signs of a reaction. If you react to the flu shot after leaving the vaccine clinic, please seek medical attention.

## Is there any treatment for the flu?

In some situations, antiviral medications might be prescribed by your health care provider. This helps to reduce the duration and severity of illness by one to two days if started within 48 hours after becoming sick. For more information about flu and flu vaccine, visit [york.ca/flu](http://york.ca/flu).