

Seasonal Influenza: What Can I Do to Protect Myself and My Family?

Influenza (flu) is a virus that infects the nose, throat, windpipe and lungs. The virus is spread from one person to another by coughing or sneezing or by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching one's eyes, nose or mouth.

People infected with influenza may be contagious one day before showing symptoms, and up to seven days after getting sick. Children may be contagious for even longer periods of time. Because it may be impossible to tell whether someone is infectious, it's important for people of all ages to protect themselves from it at all times.

Prevention tips

The best way to avoid getting influenza is to get the flu vaccine every year. You can also minimize your children's risks, and yours, by teaching them to:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, and to stay home if they're sick.
- Wash their hands often and thoroughly. If they forget to wash, put up reminder signs at their eye level to encourage healthy habits.
- Purchase child-friendly soaps that are designed to appeal to kids. You children may be more likely to use them.
- Have them carry and use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer for times when they can't wash their hands.
- Sneeze or cough into their elbows instead of their hands if they don't have a tissue. Hands are more likely to spread germs.
- Avoid touching their face. The flu virus is often spread when a person touches something that's contaminated with the virus and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.
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While these measures help reduce the risk of becoming infected, the vaccine provides better protection because it generates immunity that is specific to influenza. This year, the flu vaccine contains the H1N1 strain of the virus, so only one vaccine is needed. If your child is younger than 9 years of age and has not had an influenza vaccine in the past, he or she will need two doses separated by one month. Children who have had the vaccine before only require a single dose.

Reasons to get vaccinated

Every year, complications from seasonal influenza, such as pneumonia, kills thousands of people. Most of the people who die are older than 65, but many of those who are hospitalized are younger than 4 years. So getting vaccinated is a good idea for almost everyone.

Types of influenza vaccine

A shot and nasal spray of the flu vaccine are available:

- The shot is recommended for everyone 6 months of age and older, except those who have an egg allergy or have had a bad reaction to an earlier shot.
- The nasal spray is recommended for healthy people between 2 and 49 years of age, except pregnant women.

Talk with your doctor about the vaccine that's right for you.

Influenza vaccine during pregnancy

A recent study in the New England Journal of Medicine found that babies up to 6 months of age whose moms were vaccinated against influenza were less likely to be infected or hospitalized with influenza. That's important because infants less than 6 months old cannot get the influenza vaccine.

Additional information

Visit the following resources from the Vaccine Education Center for more information:

- [Influenza: What you should know](#)
- [A Look at Each Vaccine: Influenza Vaccines](#)
- [Our Doctors Answer Your Most Frequently Asked Questions about Influenza](#)

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