

Influenza Vaccination: Myths and Facts

Influenza Myth #1: Influenza is not a serious illness.

FACT: Each year in Canada, thousands of people die from influenza, or from complications of influenza like pneumonia.

Influenza is a highly contagious infection of the nose, throat and lungs. The virus spreads easily from person to person through breathing, coughing and sneezing. The virus can also be spread when people touch tiny droplets from coughs or sneezes on another person or on an object, and then touches their own mouth or nose before washing their hands properly.

While some symptoms are like the common cold, other symptoms include headache, chills, a dry cough, and body aches and fever. Fever and other body symptoms can usually last seven to 10 days, with cough and weakness possibly lasting up to one to two weeks more.

Influenza can lead to more serious health concerns, and even death. At particular risk are infants, people 65 years of age and older, and those with high-risk medical conditions.

An influenza vaccination is a very good way to protect yourself and others against influenza.

Influenza Myth #2: If you do not have a high-risk medical condition you do not need to be vaccinated.

FACT: Any person who wants to protect his or her health can consider influenza vaccination. **Healthcare workers who have contact with high-risk individuals have a professional responsibility to do what they can to protect these individuals from the spread of diseases such as influenza.**

Influenza Myth #3-A: If you have NEVER had influenza you do not need to be immunized.

Influenza Myth #3-B: If you have EVER had influenza you do not need to be immunized.

FACT: If you have never had influenza this does not mean that you will not get it in the future. No one is completely immune from influenza viruses, even if a person has already had the disease; most people can get sick with influenza several times over the course of his or her life, since the virus changes from year to year.

Influenza Myth #3: The influenza vaccine can give you influenza.

FACT: The influenza vaccine **cannot** give you influenza. The influenza vaccine contains non-living influenza virus particles that cannot multiply or cause infection.

Influenza Myth #4: The influenza vaccine causes severe reactions or side effects.

FACT: Influenza vaccine is very safe. Most people experience no symptoms after their influenza shot other than some redness or soreness for one or two days at the area where the needle was given.

Mild influenza-like symptoms may occur in some people, especially those being vaccinated against influenza for the first time. These symptoms are due to the body's immune response that is building to protect against actual infection. These symptoms can include mild fever, headache and aching muscles starting within six to 12 hours but ending within 24 to 48 hours. These are much less severe and do not last as long as actual influenza infection.

Influenza Myth #5: Getting an influenza shot every year may weaken your immune system.

FACT: The vaccine strengthens your body's immune system, by preparing and boosting it to help you fight the influenza virus if you contract it. People who get the influenza shot each year are better protected against influenza than those who do not get vaccinated.

Influenza Myth #6: You should not get the influenza shot if you have a number of different allergies.

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FACT: Most allergies are not a reason for refusing an influenza shot. Persons who have had a previous allergic reaction to the influenza vaccine, or any of its components, including eggs, should talk to their doctor first before getting an influenza shot.

Influenza Myth #6: Vaccination is not necessary since there are better ways of preventing the spread of influenza, such as frequent hand-washing, covering your mouth when coughing, or staying home when you are sick.

FACT: These are all very important ways to prevent the spread of infections such as influenza, but they do not mean that influenza vaccination is not necessary. Despite our best efforts, influenza may still spread throughout the community. As well, individuals who develop influenza may be infectious to others prior to the onset of symptoms, limiting the benefit of staying home when ill.

Influenza Myth #7: The influenza vaccine protects against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds or stomach illnesses

FACT: The influenza virus is very different and more severe than the common cold, or gastrointestinal illnesses ("stomach flu"). Influenza vaccine only helps the body build immunity to the viruses that cause influenza. The vaccine does not protect against the viruses or bacteria that cause colds, or gastrointestinal illnesses.

Influenza Myth #8: Someone you know got the influenza vaccine and still got the flu, so this proves the vaccine doesn't work.

FACT: At any given time there are many different types of viruses being spread that can cause symptoms like influenza, but are not actually the influenza virus.

The influenza vaccine contains three types of influenza viruses that are likely to cause influenza in the coming winter months. These are the only viruses the vaccine will protect against. Because these strains may change each year, a person needs to get

the influenza shot each year to be protected against new strains.

When the strains in the vaccine are well-matched to the strains of influenza virus in the community, the influenza shot prevents influenza in more than seven of 10 vaccinated persons. In elderly people and people who have certain chronic health conditions, the vaccine may not work as well to prevent infection, but it will still decrease symptoms and the risk of serious health concerns, such as hospitalization and death.

Influenza Myth #9: If you are pregnant or breastfeeding you should not have an influenza shot.

FACT: An influenza vaccine is safe during pregnancy. In fact, current national Canadian guidelines recommend that all pregnant women receive an influenza vaccination to protect themselves.

Babies less than six months of age, especially newborns, are at high risk from the complications of influenza, but cannot be vaccinated because their immune response to influenza vaccine is not as strong. Vaccinating their close contacts, including their mothers, can help to protect them and reduce their risk of becoming infected.

It is safe for infants to breast-feed after their mothers have been immunized with the influenza vaccine.

If you require additional information on influenza vaccination, or if you wish to discuss further any of the forms relating to influenza vaccination including the written declaration of refusal please contact the Immune Status Coordinator Dr. William Libich, libich@cc.umanitoba.ca . Thank you.