

Influenza (The Flu)

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

What is influenza (the flu)?

- Influenza usually arrives in Manitoba every year in late fall or early winter and lasts into the spring.
- Influenza is caused by the influenza (flu) virus and can be easily spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing or through contact with fluids from the nose.
- Influenza can also be spread by touching a surface or articles contaminated with influenza viruses and then by touching the mouth, eyes or nose.
- Although influenza and the common cold may seem the same, they are caused by different viruses.
- In general, influenza is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. Colds are usually milder than influenza. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds do not generally result in serious health problems such as pneumonia, bacterial infections or hospitalizations.

How can you protect yourself and others against influenza?

Yearly vaccination is the best way.

- Influenza immunization campaigns (flu clinics) are held every fall throughout Manitoba.
- Manitoba Health and Healthy Living recommends immunization against influenza for people who are at “high risk” and their caregivers.

Other ways include:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze – throw the tissue away after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. If you are not near water, use an alcohol-based hand cleanser.
- Stay away as much as you can from people who are sick.
- If you get influenza, stay home from work or school. If you are sick, do not go near other people so that you don’t make them sick.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs often spread this way.

Who is at “high risk” for influenza and should receive the vaccine?

- Anyone 65 years of age or older.
- Residents of personal care homes and other chronic care facilities.
- Persons of any age with chronic heart or lung disease.
- Anyone with cancer, anemia or a weakened immune system due to disease or medication.
- Persons with other chronic conditions such as diabetes, kidney disease, inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, alcoholism and multiple sclerosis may also benefit.

- People with any condition that reduces their ability to breathe or increases their risk of choking. Such conditions may include spinal cord injury, seizure disorders, cognitive dysfunction (mental disability), nervous system and muscular disorders.
- Children on long-term aspirin therapy.
- Healthy children six to 23 months of age.
- All pregnant women, regardless of trimester and delivery date.

Who else should receive the vaccine?

People capable of spreading influenza to those at high risk should also receive an annual “flu shot.” These include:

- health care workers in facilities and community settings, because they may unknowingly spread influenza to their patients;
- household contacts of those at risk, such as small children up to 23 months of age, seniors aged 65 years and older and individuals with a weakened immune system due to disease or medication;
- other staff in settings where care is provided for those at high risk (ex: personal care home staff, volunteers who work with seniors, child care workers);
- first responders (police officers, fire fighters, ambulance workers);
- anyone providing child care to infants up to 23 months of age in or out of the home; and
- household contacts of pregnant women.

What is influenza vaccine?

- The vaccine is an inactivated (killed virus) vaccine that contains three different virus strains. It is prepared in eggs.
- The vaccine does not contain “live” viruses, so it cannot give you influenza.

- It is important to be immunized against influenza every year because the viruses that cause it change from year to year, and protection from the vaccine decreases over time.

How effective is influenza vaccine?

- The viruses in the vaccine change each year based on international surveillance and scientists’ estimations about which types and strains will circulate in a given year.
- When the vaccine strains match the circulating influenza strains in the community, the influenza vaccine protects about 70 per cent of healthy children and adults.
- Studies involving personal care home residents indicate the influenza vaccine is 50 to 60 per cent effective in preventing hospitalization and 85 per cent effective in preventing death.
- Protection against influenza begins approximately two weeks following immunization and can last for six months or longer.

How is influenza vaccine given?

- For children 12 months and older and for adults, the vaccine is given with a needle into the muscle of the upper arm.
- For infants (six to 11 months of age), the vaccine is given in the upper thigh.

Are booster doses required?

Children younger than nine years of age:

- who have never before received a flu shot, will need two doses of influenza vaccine at least four weeks (28 days) apart. This is especially important for children (six to 23 months old) receiving their first influenza immunizations.
- who have received one or more doses of the influenza vaccine in the past, will need one dose of the vaccine yearly.

Can influenza vaccine be given at the same time as other vaccines?

- Yes. It is safe to give more than one vaccine at the same time.

What are common side effects of the influenza vaccine?

- Local reactions are common and normal, and may include soreness, swelling and redness at the injection site for up to two days.
- Other reactions can include fever, chills, headache, feeling tired or myalgia (tenderness or pain in the muscles).
- If these symptoms persist or become worse, seek medical advice.

Rare side effects

- Guillain-Barré syndrome, a form of paralysis that is usually temporary, occurs rarely, estimated at one in every 1,000,000 vaccinations.
- Reactions such as allergic responses, severe pain or swelling should be reported to your public health nurse or doctor.
- In past influenza seasons some individuals experienced one or more of the following symptoms associated with oculorespiratory syndrome (ORS): red eyes, shortness of breath, chest tightness, cough, sore throat or swelling of part or all of the face. These signs and symptoms usually appeared within 24 hours of immunization and disappeared within two days. Studies show that when these individuals are re-immunized with the influenza vaccine, they may experience similar but milder symptoms. Anyone who had a reaction should check with a doctor or nurse to find out if they should be immunized again.

Who should not get influenza vaccine?

- Anyone who has a severe allergy to egg protein, formaldehyde, gelatin, neomycin, thimerosal or latex (vaccine content varies by manufacturer). Check

with your public health nurse or doctor if you are not sure about getting influenza vaccine.

- Infants younger than six months of age.
- Anyone who has a serious acute illness, with or without a fever, on the day they are to be immunized.

Note: A mild illness, with or without a low fever, is not a reason to avoid immunization.

- Persons who have developed Guillain-Barré syndrome, or any other demyelinating neurologic illness within eight weeks of a previous influenza vaccination.

How can I be immunized?

- If you are in one of the groups previously listed, visit a public health clinic (schedules and locations announced every fall in local newspapers and through Health Links-Info Santé) or your doctor or nurse to get immunized. Some doctors' offices may charge a fee for supplies.
- If you are not in one of the groups previously listed, check with a doctor's office or pharmacist to see if you can purchase the vaccine.

What should you do if you think you have influenza?

- Most people can manage influenza at home with plenty of rest, fluids and acetaminophen (also called Tylenol® or Tempra®) for fever control and muscle aches.
- Do not give ASA (aspirin) to children.
- Antibiotics do not help unless bacterial complications develop.
- Antiviral drugs may reduce and shorten the length of influenza symptoms when taken early in the illness. These drugs need to be started early (within 48 hours of onset of symptoms) and are not currently eligible for provincial drug program reimbursement.

- You should see your doctor if:
 - you have a cough with cloudy (yellow or green) phlegm, especially with persistent high fever;
 - you have difficulty breathing, or are not getting better after trying rest, fluids and acetaminophen;
 - you have a small child with a high fever.

Recommended resources

Available at local bookstores:

- Your Child's Best Shot: A Parents' Guide to Vaccination, 3rd Edition, (2006). Canadian Paediatric Society
- Vaccines: What You Should Know, 3rd Edition (2003). Dr. Paul A. Offitt & Dr. Louis M. Bell

Available on the Internet:

- Government of Manitoba – Public Health Division
www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/index.html
- Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness & Promotion – Canadian Public Health Association
www.immunize.cpha.ca
- Public Health Agency of Canada – Immunization and Vaccines
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/index.html
- Canadian Paediatric Society
www.caringforkids.cps.ca/immunization/index.htm
- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention – USA
www.cdc.gov/flu/
- Immunization Action Coalition
www.immunize.org/
- Health Canada – It's Your Health
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/flu-grippe-eng.php

Information about the shots that you or your children receive may be recorded in the Manitoba Immunization Monitoring System (MIMS). This computerized database allows your doctor, your child's doctor or your public health nurse to find out what shots you or your child have had or need to have. Information collected in MIMS may be used to produce vaccination records, or notify you or your doctor if someone has missed a particular shot. Manitoba Health and Healthy Living may use the information to monitor how well different vaccines work in preventing disease.

If you need information on the shots that you or your child has received, contact your doctor, your local public health unit or nursing station.

For more information

Talk to your local public health nurse, doctor or call Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 in Winnipeg or toll-free at 1-888-315-9257; or access our website at www.gov.mb.ca/health/flu.

