

How can I tell the difference between influenza and a bad cold?

- Many viruses cause runny/stuffy nose, sore throat, cough, fever and malaise. These are called “upper respiratory tract illness.” If there is no fever and we don’t feel too bad, we call this a “cold.” If we feel miserable and have a fever, we often call what we have “the flu.” However, these symptoms can be caused by many other viruses as well as influenza, such as parainfluenza virus, respiratory syncytial virus, adenoviruses, and rhinoviruses.
- Compared to other viruses, influenza is more likely to be associated with sudden onset, high fever and cough within the first two days. However, influenza can cause mild illness, and other viruses can cause cough and fever. You can only tell what virus is causing the problem by having a lab test.

Is the “stomach flu” a type of influenza?

- No. Stomach flu, or viral gastroenteritis, is caused by different viruses.
- Nearly four in 10 Ontarians incorrectly believe that diarrhea and vomiting are the main symptoms of influenza.
- While diarrhea and vomiting may occur with influenza, influenza is a respiratory illness, with fever, cough and muscle aches being the most common symptoms.

Will the flu vaccine make me more vulnerable to any other illnesses?

- No. There is no evidence that the flu vaccine makes people more susceptible to any other illnesses.

Will the flu vaccine protect me from any other illnesses?

- The flu vaccine only protects you from influenza infection.
- The vaccine will not protect you from other respiratory illnesses, even if the diseases have similar symptoms.

Should I encourage my patients to get vaccinated?

- Mount Sinai Hospital is committed to provide the safest care to our patients. As such, we are offering the influenza vaccine to all non-immunized patients admitted to our institution between October and January.

For More Information

Ontario’s flu campaign: 1-877-844-1944

Mount Sinai Hospital:
www.mountsinai.ca/YourHealth/Flu

Toronto Public Health:
www.toronto.ca/health/flu_facts.htm

Centre for Disease Control:
www.cdc.gov/flu/

Health Canada:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/flu-grippe_e.html

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Influenza Questions and Answers

Infection Control and Occupational Health and Safety



What is influenza?

- Influenza is a disease caused by an influenza virus infection.
- Symptoms include fever, headache, runny nose, cough and muscle aches.
- Influenza can affect anyone, including young, healthy people. Healthy adults may feel miserable for a few days but usually recover uneventfully.
- In the elderly or people with chronic illness, influenza can result in serious complications including pneumonia, worsening of their underlying illness, and sometimes death.
- Influenza is often called “the flu,” but people use the term “flu” to refer to many other infections as well.

How is influenza spread?

- Influenza is spread by direct contact and by airborne droplets expelled during breathing, talking, sneezing or coughing.
- Influenza is very easily spread. When one person in a household has influenza, there is a 15 per cent chance that someone else will get it. In nursing homes, unless vaccination levels in residents and staff are very high, there is a 50 per cent chance of an influenza outbreak (more than two cases of acute respiratory illness occurring within 48 hours) each year.

When do people get influenza?

- Symptoms start 18 hours to four days after exposure to someone with influenza.
- Influenza does not occur year-round in any country. In Canada, it is uncommon in the spring, summer and fall. Almost all influenza occurs in a 10-12 week period, sometime between November and March. The beginning of the flu season is usually sometime in late December, but is different every year.

What is the flu vaccine?

- Flu vaccines are a safe and effective means of preventing both mild and severe cases of influenza. The flu vaccine is made of antigens from killed influenza viruses.

- The flu vaccine starts working a few days after you get it and is fully effective after 14 days. It will continue to protect you for at least nine months.
- Vaccines that provide protection against influenza have been used for more than 60 years. Each year, more than 10 million people around the world get their flu vaccine.
- Current influenza vaccines are very effective in preventing illness in healthy adults under 65 years of age. In older adults and those with medical illnesses, flu vaccination effectively prevents serious illness, hospitalization and death. In other words, it reduces illness but does not eliminate it.

Why should I get the vaccine?

- It will protect you from getting the flu yourself and from spreading it to your family, friends, and patients.
- The risk of getting influenza is higher in hospitals than other places.
- The Canadian National Advisory Committee on Immunization recommends that all health-care workers be vaccinated in order to protect their patients from this disease.
- Two randomized controlled clinical trials found that vaccination of health-care workers reduced all causes of mortality in the hospitalized patients they cared for.
- Healthy adults who get the flu shot spend less time off work, and less time ill during their vacations and the holiday season.

I received the flu vaccine last year. Do I need it again?

- To remain protected this year, you need to have this year’s flu vaccine.
- Influenza viruses are always mutating to avoid our immune systems, so last year’s flu vaccine may not provide adequate protection against this year’s flu strains.
- Each year, the exact strains used in the flu vaccine are changed, reflecting the most current and emerging strains to provide you with the best protection. Experts from the World Health Organization and influenza reference laboratories predict in the spring which strains are most likely to cause infection in Canada the following winter. These new strains are used to make the vaccine.

What are the side effects of the flu shot?

- The most common side effect is a sore arm following vaccination. This usually lasts for a few hours but in some instances may last for few days.
- About one in 10,000 people experience red, itchy eyes, dry cough, sore throat and/or swelling of eyebrows or other areas of the face. These symptoms are usually mild and only last a few hours.
- Several studies have found no adverse long-term effects.
- The new purified influenza vaccines we use do not cause fever, malaise, or muscle aches.
- The flu vaccine contains non-infectious viruses, and therefore it cannot cause influenza.

Is there anyone who should not get vaccinated?

- People who are allergic to eggs should not take the flu vaccine because it may contain traces of egg protein.
- People who have had allergic reactions to other vaccines should consult with a physician before being vaccinated.

Is the influenza vaccine safe during pregnancy?

- The influenza vaccine is safe during pregnancy. In fact, being vaccinated is less risky to the developing child than getting influenza and experts recommend that pregnant women or those trying to conceive become vaccinated.

Are antibiotics effective against influenza?

- Antibiotics are ineffective against influenza because the flu is a viral infection. Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial infections.
- Antiviral drugs for influenza treatment are available. They reduce the severity of symptoms and how long they last by about one-third, but only if they are started in the very early stages of influenza infection.