

Influenza Vaccine (Flu Shots)

What are flu shots?

Flu shots are immunizations that help to prevent the flu, an illness caused by infection with the influenza virus. Flu is a very contagious disease that causes symptoms such as fever, cough, headaches, body aches and pains, sore throat, and tiredness. Since different forms of the virus appear each winter, a new vaccine is made each year that will fight the viruses most likely to occur that year. Even with the vaccine, it is still possible to be infected with a different form of the virus not covered by the vaccine.

In the United States, the flu season usually runs from December through March. To give your body time to build up protection against the virus, you should get the flu shot in October or November of each year.

Why should I get a flu shot?

From 1972 to 1991, there were 10 major outbreaks of flu that caused over 200,000 deaths. More than 90% of the people who died were over the age of 65. During major outbreaks of the flu, older people are more likely to become sicker than younger adults and to require hospitalization. When more people get flu shots in a given year, fewer cases occur in all age groups.

Who should have a flu shot?

People who should have a flu shot include:

- all people 50 years old and older
- people with diabetes or chronic problems of the lungs, heart, or kidneys
- people whose immune system may be weakened, such as by HIV infection, cancer, or an organ transplant
- residents of nursing homes and other chronic care facilities
- people who work in nursing homes and hospitals where it would be easy to get or spread the virus
- family members of people who are at high risk of getting the flu and people who live in the same residence as an older adult
- anyone who wants to reduce the chance of getting the flu
- anyone who will be traveling abroad.

Do not take the vaccine if you have an allergy to eggs.

Your health care provider may want to postpone your shot if you have a fever or a respiratory infection.

Are there side effects?

You cannot get influenza (flu) from the vaccine because flu shots are made with a killed virus. You may have a sore arm around the site of the shot for up to a few days. Occasionally, people have fever, tiredness, or body aches from the shot.

These symptoms start 6 to 12 hours after the vaccination and may last 1 or 2 days. Rarely, allergic reactions occur.

What other things should I know about flu shots?

- The cost of flu shots to high risk groups is covered by Alberta Health Care. It may also be covered by private insurance that has a wellness benefit. Check with your insurance company. Many employers offer flu shots as an employee benefit.
- You can get flu shots at your health care provider's office or at most local health departments. Your employer may offer flu shots in the fall. In addition, flu shots are often given at health fairs, grocery stores, drug stores, and senior centers.
- Adults over 65 should also be immunized against pneumococcal disease (pneumococcal pneumonia), mumps, measles, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, and hepatitis B.
- Check with your health care provider about which immunizations you need. The flu shot can be given at the same time as the pneumococcal shot without increasing side effects.