

What is influenza (the flu)?

Influenza (the flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. About 5% to 20% of U.S. residents get the flu each year. Most people who get the flu recover in a few days or less than two weeks, but some will develop more life-threatening complications (such as pneumonia). The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccination each year. People age 65 and older, young children, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious flu complications.

What can I do to protect myself against the flu?

By far, the single best way to prevent the flu is for individuals, especially people at high risk for serious complications from the flu, to get a vaccination each fall. Follow these good health habits to help prevent the flu:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick.
- When coughing or sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, your arm or sleeve.
- Wash your hands often to help protect you from germs.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Eat healthy and get some daily activity to help keep your immune system in top form.

What is the flu shot?

The flu shot is an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle, usually in the arm. It contains three influenza vaccine strains recommended for this year. Viruses for the flu shot are grown in chicken eggs.

Why should I get a flu shot?

Influenza is a serious disease, and even healthy people of any age can get it. The “flu season” in the United States is usually from November through April each year. During this time, flu viruses are circulating in the population. An annual flu vaccine is the best way to reduce the chances that you will get the flu and lessen the chance that you will transmit it to others.

I got a flu shot last year, why do I need one this year?

Flu viruses change from year to year. This means you can get the flu more than once during your lifetime. The immunity that is built up from having the flu caused by one virus strain does not always provide protection when a new strain is circulating. Therefore, a vaccine made against flu viruses circulating last year may not protect against the newer viruses. That is why the influenza vaccine is updated to include current viruses every year. Another reason to get flu vaccine every year is that after you get vaccinated your immunity declines over time and may be too low to provide protection after a year.

Who should NOT get the vaccine?

Some people should not be vaccinated without first consulting a physician. They include:

- people who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs,
- people who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past,
- people who developed Guillian-Barré syndrome (GBS) within six weeks of getting an influenza vaccine previously,
- children less than six months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for use in this age group), and
- people who have a moderate or severe illness with a fever should wait to get vaccinated until their symptoms lessen.

If you have questions about whether you should get a flu vaccine, consult your healthcare provider.