

Questions and Answers about Manitoba's Seasonal Influenza Immunization Program

Public Health - Factsheet

Immunization has saved more lives in Canada in the last 60 years than any other medical intervention.¹ Vaccines help your immune system recognize and fight bacteria and viruses that cause diseases.

What is seasonal influenza?

Seasonal influenza (the flu) is a respiratory infection caused by a virus that can seem similar to the common cold, but the signs and symptoms of the flu are usually more severe. Sudden high fever, body aches, extreme tiredness and dry cough are more common with the flu than the common cold. Other common symptoms include headache, chills, loss of appetite and sore throat. Nausea and upset stomach may also occur, especially in young children. The flu can lead to more serious problems like pneumonia and bacterial infections, sometimes resulting in hospitalization.

How is the flu spread?

The flu can spread easily from person to person through coughing, sneezing or sharing food or drinks. You can also get the flu by touching objects contaminated with flu virus and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose. For this reason, it's important to cover your nose and mouth with your forearm when you cough or sneeze and wash your hands often with soap and water (or hand sanitizer if soap and water are unavailable), especially after coughing and sneezing.

What can be done to fight the flu?

There are steps you can take to minimize the risks of getting the flu including covering coughs and sneezes; washing your hands regularly; and getting immunized with a flu vaccine every fall.

What do I do if I, or my child(ren), have the flu?

Most people can treat their symptoms and recover at home. If your symptoms get worse, or, if you don't recover as you normally would, contact your health care provider. If you or a loved one has any of the following symptoms, go directly to an emergency room, nursing station, health centre, or call 911:

- shortness of breath or difficulty breathing that persists or worsens
- severe weakness
- dehydration or no urination for 12 hours
- drowsiness or confusion
- fever in an infant under three months of age

People who are normally healthy and have symptoms of the flu should seek medical attention as soon as possible if they experience any of the following:

- difficult or painful breathing
- coughing up bloody sputum (phlegm or saliva)
- wheezing
- fever for three to four days that is not getting better or is getting worse
- sudden return of high fever or other symptoms after initial improvement
- extreme ear pain
- feel severely ill

What is H1N1 flu?

A new strain of H1N1 influenza A emerged in 2009. As it was a new strain of flu virus, it caused serious illness in many individuals. This is known as a pandemic. The H1N1 virus is now considered to be one of the most common circulating strains in a normal flu season. The annual flu vaccine protects against H1N1.

What is the flu vaccine?

There are many different strains of flu virus that circulate each year. The flu vaccine does not protect against all of them. Every year, scientists monitor the global spread of flu and decide which flu strains will likely cause the most illness during the flu season. Those strains are then put into the flu vaccine for that year so each year, the vaccine is different. For this

¹ The Public Health Agency of Canada

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reason and because protection provided by the vaccine decreases over time, it's important to get the flu vaccine every fall.

The flu vaccine cannot offer protection against other viruses or bacteria that cause the common cold or stomach flu.

Is the flu vaccine effective?

The flu vaccine has been shown to be effective, with the highest effectiveness demonstrated against laboratory-confirmed influenza. Immunization has shown to reduce the number of physician visits, hospitalizations and deaths among those at highest risk of influenza and its complications, including:

- people 65 years of age and older
- residents of personal care homes or long-term care facilities
- children six to 59 months of age
- individuals with a chronic health condition (ex: diabetes, asthma, etc.)
- pregnant women
- health care workers and first responders
- regular caregivers of children up to five years of age
- household contacts of anyone at highest risk including those with infants under six months of age and/or expecting a newborn
- Indigenous peoples

What flu vaccines are available in Manitoba?

There are three different flu vaccines approved by Health Canada and available free-of-charge in Manitoba. There are two inactivated influenza vaccines; both are given by injection (needle) however one is for people six months of age and older (standard-dose influenza vaccine), and the other is for people aged 65 years and older (high-dose influenza vaccine) who are living in a long-term care facility. The third vaccine that is available is a live attenuated influenza vaccine that is a nasal spray for healthy children two to 17 years of age as well as for healthy adults up to 59 years of age who are needle averse.

The standard-dose inactivated influenza vaccine offered to people aged six months and older as well as

the live attenuated influenza vaccine offer protection against four (2A + 2B) flu strains that are most likely to cause illness. The high-dose influenza vaccine given to seniors in long-term care facilities protects against three (2A + 1B) strains of influenza.

Senior residents of long-term care facilities are very susceptible to complications from influenza. Although it protects against only three of the flu strains, the high-dose influenza vaccine offered to residents of long-term care facilities is expected to provide better protection because it contains four times the amount of flu virus antigen per strain compared to the vaccine being offered to all Manitobans.

Why is the live attenuated influenza vaccine no longer preferentially recommended for children?

Some study data over the past few influenza seasons from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland and the vaccine manufacturer (AstraZeneca) shows relatively lower vaccine effectiveness of live attenuated influenza vaccine, particularly with respect to the H1N1 influenza A strain among children two to 17 years of age. Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and the United States' Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), therefore, do NOT **preferentially** recommend live attenuated influenza vaccine for healthy children two to 17 years of age. NACI does, however, conclude that the current evidence indicates the live attenuated influenza vaccine is comparable in providing protection against influenza to the inactivated standard-dose influenza vaccine.

When should people get immunized?

The sooner you or your child(ren) get immunized, the better because the flu season in Manitoba generally begins in late fall and lasts into spring. Also, the flu vaccine takes about two weeks to start working. Don't wait until people around you or your child(ren) start getting sick before immunizing yourself or your child(ren). For these reasons, it's recommended people get immunized early fall.

Who should get the flu vaccine?

An annual flu vaccine is available free-of-charge to all Manitobans six months of age and older as part of

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Manitoba's routine immunization schedule. Getting immunized against the flu every year is especially important for Manitobans who are at increased risk of serious illness from the flu, their caregivers and close contacts. However, it's also a benefit for healthy individuals to be immunized. The more people who are immunized, the better because it helps protect people with certain medical conditions (ex: people undergoing cancer treatment) and newborn infants who are unable to get immunized.

What if I, or my child(ren), have an allergy to eggs?

All flu vaccines available in Canada are manufactured by a process involving chicken eggs, which may result in the flu vaccine containing trace amounts of egg protein. Public health officials have reviewed the data and determined that it is safe for egg allergic individuals to be immunized against flu, with any of the flu vaccines available in Manitoba and Canada (needle or nasal spray).

Is mercury in the flu vaccine bad?

Some flu vaccines contain minute quantities of thimerosal (mercury), which is used as a preservative to keep the vaccine sterile. The minute amount of thimerosal in a vaccine is proven to be safe and countless scientific studies have proven that there is no association between childhood vaccination with thimerosal-containing vaccines and neurodevelopmental conditions (ex: autism). If this is of concern, some flu vaccines including the nasal spray are thimerosal-free.

Where can someone get the flu vaccine?

To find out the best time and place as well as check for flu vaccine availability, contact your health care provider at your local public health office, nursing station, doctor's office, pharmacy or ACCESS Centre.

For more information on the flu and the flu vaccine:

Talk to a health care provider.

Call Health Links–Info Santé in Winnipeg at 204-788-8200; toll-free elsewhere in Manitoba 1-888-315-9257.

Or visit:

- **Manitoba's Seasonal Influenza Program:**
<http://www.manitoba.ca/health/flu/>
- **National Advisory Committee on Immunization:**
www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-statement-seasonal-influenza-vaccine-2018-2019.html