

INFLUENZA VACCINE

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is Influenza?

Influenza (or the “flu”) is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that is caused by a virus. Although most people are ill for only a few days, influenza is a serious illness that causes thousands of deaths each year, mostly among the elderly. **The flu is highly contagious.** A person with the flu can start spreading the illness the day before feeling sick. One can continue to spread the flu for up to seven days after symptoms begin. . The viruses that cause influenza change often. The defenses your body built up against last year’s flu virus may not work against this year’s flu virus. For this reason, the influenza vaccine is updated each year. The vaccine will not protect all persons who get vaccinated against influenza, but vaccinated people who do get influenza often have milder cases than those who do not get vaccinated.

Influenza can cause:

- Fever
- Chills
- Headache
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Muscle aches

How Do You Catch the Flu?

1. **Person to person.** The most common way the flu is spread is through the respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs and sneezes. If these droplets are deposited on the mucous membranes of the nose or mouth of a near-by individual, infection may occur. During the flu season, spending time in crowded places (restaurants, stores, and offices) puts you at high risk for getting the flu.
2. **By Indirect Contact.** People with the flu can contaminate objects they touch (doorknobs, telephones, and faucets). The object may remain contaminated for a few hours. If you touch the contaminated object during that period and then touch your own mouth or nose before washing your hands you may expose yourself to the flu virus. Frequent handwashing is protection against the flu.

What is the Influenza Vaccine?

Influenza vaccine can prevent influenza. Protection develops about 2 weeks after getting the shot. Protection from the vaccine may last up to one year depending on the type of vaccine you receive. There are two types of vaccine available. The inactivated form of the vaccine is given as a shot. There is also a live vaccine that is administered as a nasal spray. This vaccine is approved for ages 5 to 49 years



Who should get the Vaccine?

Anyone who wants to reduce his or her chance of catching influenza should get the vaccine. Individuals at risk for influenza and people in close contact with them (including all household members) should get the vaccine. An annual flu shot is recommended for these high risk groups:

- Anyone **50 years of age or older**
- Residents of **long term care facilities**
- **All children** 6 months up to 19th birthday
- **Health care workers**
- Children and teenagers on **long-term aspirin treatment**
- Women who will be **pregnant** during flu season
- **Household contacts and out-of-home caretakers** of children 6 months up to 19th birthday.
- Anyone who has required **regular medical follow-up or hospitalization** during the preceding year due to a long-term illness (i.e. asthma, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, immunosuppression, kidney disease, lung disease).
- People with **weakened immune systems**
- Anyone with **close contact with those at risk**
- Students and others in **institutional settings**
- Essential service personnel

If you have any questions about whether **you** should receive the vaccine, consult your physician.

When should I get influenza vaccine?

Because influenza activity can start as early as December, the best time to get influenza vaccine is during October and November. Getting the vaccine after November can still provide protection. Because the virus changes from year to year, yearly revaccination is necessary. Influenza vaccine can be given at the same time as other vaccines, including pneumococcal vaccine.

Special considerations for the pediatric population include:

- Individuals 9 years of age and older need one dose.
- Children ages 6 months up to 9 years old need two doses, given one month apart, the first time they get vaccinated against influenza.

What risks are associated with influenza vaccine?

The influenza vaccine is well tolerated by the vast majority of individuals who get it each year. The most common complaint is soreness at the injection site for a day or two. Occasionally, one may experience a fever or acheyness for a day or two. **THE VACCINE CANNOT CAUSE INFLUENZA.** The risk of the vaccine causing an allergic reaction, or death, is extremely small. Do not take the vaccine until you have consulted with your physician if you:

- Have had a serious allergic reaction to eggs.
- Have had a serious reaction to a flu shot in the past.
- Have ever had Guillain-Barre syndrome.
- You are moderately or severely ill at the time the shot is scheduled.

What if there is a moderate or severe reaction?

Life-threatening allergic reactions are very rare. If they do occur, it is within a few minutes to a few hours after the shot. Contact your physician if you have symptoms of a reaction from the vaccine such as a hives, high fever, or weakness. Call 911 right away if you have difficulty breathing or any signs of a serious reaction. Signs of a serious allergic reaction can include:

- Difficulty Breathing
- Hoarseness or wheezing
- A fast heartbeat
- High fever
- Hives
- Dizziness
- Paleness
- Behavioral changes

Other Ways to Prevent the Flu.

If you are unable to be vaccinated there are other ways to protect against the flu. Antiviral medications can also be used to prevent the flu. Additionally, avoid close contact with people who are sick. If you become sick, protect others by staying home if possible. If not, keep your distance. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and dispose of it in the trash. **Above all wash your hands and don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth.**

If you have any questions about influenza or influenza vaccination, call your physician, your local Department of Health or contact The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at www.cdc.gov/flu (1-800-CDC-INFO)

Reference: Seasonal Flu: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/flugallery/index.htm>.

For more Patient Education Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education