

Fact Sheet

Influenza: Debunking the Myths

MYTH: Influenza is just a bad cold

FACT: In general, influenza is worse than a cold. A cold and influenza are both respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses. Influenza symptoms, which can disrupt your work and social plans for up to two weeks,¹ may include fever, headaches, extreme tiredness, cough, sore throat, nasal congestion and body aches.²

People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose than people with influenza. Unlike influenza, colds generally do not result in serious health problems such as pneumonia, bacterial infections or hospitalization.³ No vaccine can prevent a cold, but the influenza vaccine can help prevent influenza.⁴

MYTH: The influenza vaccine is only for people who are at high-risk

FACT: Anyone exposed to an influenza virus may contract influenza. Influenza, which can spread easily from person to person, is a contagious disease of the respiratory tract (nose, throat and lungs) that can lead to serious complications from influenza, including pneumonia and the worsening of chronic conditions such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes.¹

Getting vaccinated against influenza helps protect those around you who may be at higher risk for complications.² The elderly and young children are just two of the groups considered to be at increased risk for complications from influenza, but influenza vaccination can benefit almost anyone over the age of six months.^{2*}

MYTH: I got vaccinated last year, so I don't need to get vaccinated this year

FACT: Influenza viruses change from year to year, so even if you were immune to influenza strains circulating in the past, you may not be immune to new strains that emerge this season.¹ The best way to help protect yourself^{*} from new influenza strains is to get vaccinated each year.⁴

MYTH: You can get influenza from the injected vaccine

FACT: You cannot get influenza by receiving an injected influenza vaccine. The injectable influenza virus vaccines are made from influenza viruses that have been killed, and a killed virus cannot give you influenza.⁵

Most people who receive the influenza vaccine do not develop serious problems; however, all vaccines have potential side effects.⁵ The most common side effects of influenza vaccines include minor soreness or redness at the site of the injection and mild general symptoms.⁵

MYTH: Influenza cannot cause serious health complications or death

FACT: Each year on average, in the United States more than 200,000 people are hospitalized and 36,000 die from influenza and its complications.¹ Influenza can lead to serious complications, including pneumonia and the worsening of chronic conditions such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes.¹

MYTH: There is no reason for people younger than 65 years old to get vaccinated against influenza

FACT: While it's true that getting an influenza vaccination doesn't guarantee you won't become infected with influenza, the vaccine prevents influenza in about 70 percent to 90 percent of healthy people younger than 65.⁵

Influenza vaccination is recommended for all children over six months old and for anyone else who wants to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza or transmitting influenza to others should they become infected.²

** Influenza vaccines are not currently approved for children under six months of age and may not prevent the disease in 100 percent of individuals. Persons should consult their healthcare providers to determine if they have a condition that precludes them from receiving the vaccine. All vaccines have side effects. The most common side effects of influenza vaccines include local reactions and mild general symptoms.*

References:

1. Questions & Answers: Seasonal Influenza. Available at: www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/disease.htm. Accessed May 2008.

2. Prevention and Control of Influenza: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. Available at: www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/rr/rr57e717.pdf. Accessed July 2008.

3. Questions & Answers: Cold Versus Flu. Available at: 1. Questions & Answers: Seasonal Influenza. Available at: www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/coldflu.htm. Accessed May 2008.

4. Key Facts About Seasonal Influenza. Available at: www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm. Accessed May 2008.

5. Questions & Answers: Seasonal Flu Shot. Available at: www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/flushot.htm. Accessed May 2008.

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Influenza: Why Vaccinate?

Influenza is a contagious disease of the respiratory tract (nose, throat and lungs) that can lead to serious complications. The main way that influenza virus spreads is from person to person in droplets from coughs and sneezes from an infected person. These droplets are propelled up to 3 feet through the air. On average, five to 20 percent of the US population becomes infected with influenza every year.¹

Influenza Can Be Deadly

Each year, on average, in the United States more than 200,000 people are hospitalized and an average of 36,000 US residents die each year from influenza and its complications,¹ which is similar to the 42,000 Americans who die each year from breast cancer,² and about half the 73,000 Americans who die annually of diabetes and its complications. Influenza-related complications can include pneumonia and the worsening of chronic conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes.³

Getting vaccinated against influenza helps protect those around you who may be at higher risk for complications. The elderly and young children are just two of the groups considered to be at increased risk for complications from influenza, but influenza vaccination may benefit almost anyone over the age of six months.^{4*}

Vaccination Helps to Prevent Widespread Illness and Save Lives

Influenza viruses change from year to year, so even if you were immune to influenza strains circulating in the past, you may not be immune to new strains that emerge this season.¹ The best way to help protect yourself from new influenza strains is to get vaccinated each fall.³

While it is true that getting an influenza vaccination doesn't guarantee you won't become infected with influenza, the vaccine prevents influenza in about 70 percent to 90 percent of healthy people younger than age 65,⁵ and tends to decrease the severity of illness in those who do get infected.

Influenza vaccination has a proven safety record and is the most effective measure available to help prevent influenza.³

CDC Recommendations

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently recommends annual influenza vaccination for approximately 248 million Americans, the number of people who actually get vaccinated is much lower. CDC recommends influenza vaccination for all persons who want to reduce the risk of acquiring influenza or transmitting it to others, as well as the following groups⁴:

- All children between the ages of 6 months to 18 years*
- People aged 50 years or older
- All women who will be pregnant during the influenza season
- People with certain chronic medical conditions*
- Residents of nursing homes and long-term care facilities
- Healthcare workers involved in direct patient care
- Healthy out-of-home caregivers and household contacts of persons at high risk for complications of influenza, including contacts of children younger than 1 years, and adults aged 50 years or older

** Influenza vaccines are not currently approved for children under six months of age and may not prevent the disease in 100 percent of individuals. Persons should consult their healthcare providers to determine if they have a condition that precludes them from receiving the vaccine. All vaccines have side effects. The most common side effects of influenza vaccines include local reactions and mild general symptoms.*

References:

1. Questions & Answers: Seasonal Influenza. Available at: www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/disease.htm. Accessed May 2008.
2. National Vital Statistics Reports. Deaths: Preliminary Data for 2004. Available at: www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/vsr54_19.pdf. Accessed May 2008.
3. Key Facts About Seasonal Influenza. Available at: www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm. Accessed May 2008.
4. Prevention and Control of Influenza: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. Available at: www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/rr/rr57e717.pdf. Accessed July 2008.
5. Questions & Answers: Seasonal Flu Shot. Available at: www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/flushot.htm. Accessed May 2008.