Influenza (Flu) Vaccine

What is the influenza vaccine?

The influenza vaccine protects against the influenza virus.

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that is caused by a virus. Symptoms start suddenly and may include:

- a fever and chills
- a sore throat or cough
- a headache
- feeling tired
- muscle aches
- not feeling hungry or not wanting to eat (poor appetite)

Other symptoms may include feeling sick to your stomach (nausea), vomiting (throwing up), or having loose stool (diarrhea). These are more common in young children. In some cases, influenza can lead to a lung infection (pneumonia) or make other health problems worse. Even healthy, young people can get very sick or die from influenza.

Each year around the world, influenza makes 3 to 5 million people seriously ill and causes 290,000 to 650,000 deaths. In Canada, influenza and pneumonia together are among the top 10 leading causes of death, and influenza causes about 15,000 hospital stays each year.

How does it spread?

Influenza can spread in the following ways:

- A person with influenza sneezes, coughs, talks, or even breathes.
- You breathe in the virus.
- You touch something that has the virus on it (such as hands or a doorknob), then touch your eyes, mouth, or nose.

You can spread influenza before symptoms start.

How can I stop influenza from spreading?

To stop influenza from spreading:

- Get the influenza vaccine every year.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unclean hands.
- Wash your hands with warm water and soap or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer often.
- Cover your cough and sneeze into your arm or a tissue, not your hand.
- Stay home when you are sick.

Who should get the influenza vaccine?

Everyone is at risk of influenza. You should get the influenza vaccine if you are age 6 months or older. Influenza can make you very sick and lead to other health problems, especially if:

- You have heart or lung conditions, diabetes, cancer, a weakened immune system, obesity, or other health problems.
- You live in a care facility, like a continuing care home.
- You are under age 5 years.
- You are age 65 years or older.
- You are pregnant.
- You are an Indigenous person.

It is important to get the influenza vaccine each year, especially if:

- You have a high risk of getting very sick from influenza.
- You have close contact with someone who is at high risk of getting very sick from influenza, such as family members and caregivers.
- You are a healthcare provider. Getting the vaccine helps to protect you and the people you care for.
- You are at risk of being exposed to avian influenza. The influenza vaccine does not protect against avian influenza, but it may lower your risk of getting both viruses at the same time.
- You provide an essential community service, such as you work in healthcare, education, or public safety.

The vaccine is free of charge if you live, work, or go to school in Alberta, or if you are visiting Alberta.

How many doses do I need?

If you are under age 9 years and are getting the influenza vaccine for the first time, you need 2 doses, at least 4 weeks apart.

Everyone else needs only 1 dose of the influenza vaccine each influenza season. The season starts in late fall and lasts through the winter.

If you have had a stem cell transplant or are getting CAR T-cell therapy (a type of cancer treatment), talk to your healthcare provider to see how many doses you need, and when you can get them.

Are there different types of influenza vaccines?

Every year, Alberta looks at information about influenza to decide which vaccines to offer free of charge.

There are 3 types of inactivated (killed) influenza vaccine. They all protect against 3 types of influenza virus.

Talk to your healthcare provider to know which vaccine is recommended for you.

Standard dose

The standard-dose influenza vaccine is for most healthy people age 6 months to 64 years.

High dose

The high-dose influenza vaccine has more of the inactivated influenza virus than the standard-dose. It gives more protection for people with a higher risk of getting very sick.

This vaccine is recommended for people age 18 years and older who have:

- had CAR T-cell therapy
- had a stem cell transplant
- had or will have an organ transplant

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding/chestfeeding and have had any of the above treatments, Alberta transplant experts recommend the high-dose influenza vaccine for you. It is unknown how the vaccine can affect pregnancy or if it passes into human milk.

Using the high-dose influenza vaccine in people under age 65 years is called “off-label use”. This means the vaccine is used differently than the way it was originally approved. Vaccine experts support these off-label uses and have no safety concerns.

Adjuvanted dose

The adjuvanted-dose influenza vaccine has an added component that helps the body build a stronger immune

See reverse for more information

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response. It is for people age 65 years and older who don't need the high-dose influenza vaccine. Your immune system changes as you age, and this vaccine helps older adults get a better immune response.

How well does the vaccine work?

How well the vaccine works is different each influenza season.

A new vaccine is made every year to protect against the 3 influenza viruses that are most likely to make you sick. Even when the vaccine does not exactly match the viruses that spread where you live, it can still help protect you from getting influenza or getting very sick from it.

The influenza vaccine is the best way to lower your risk of getting influenza and having related health problems. It can also help stop you from spreading the virus to others. The influenza vaccine will start to protect you about 2 weeks after you get it.

Where can I get the influenza vaccine?

Public health or community health centres

The influenza vaccine is available at public health or community health centres for:

- children age 6 months up to and including age 4 years and their families
- people who have had CAR T-cell therapy, who have had a stem cell transplant, or who have had or will have an organ transplant

Influenza vaccine is available at public health or community health centres from mid to late October to the end of March. To find influenza immunization clinics where you live or to book an appointment, visit primarycarealberta.ca/influenza or call Health Link at 811.

Pharmacists

Pharmacists can give the influenza vaccine to anyone age 5 years and older.

Check with your pharmacist to find out if they offer the vaccine.

If you have had CAR T-cell therapy, a stem cell transplant, or have had or will have an organ transplant, you need to go to a public health or community health centre to get the high-dose influenza vaccine.

If you want a type of influenza vaccine that is not free of charge (for example, the nasal spray influenza vaccine), you may be able to buy it at a pharmacy. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is right for you. You can also check with your health insurance provider to see if they cover the cost.

Are there side effects from the influenza vaccine?

There can be side effects from the influenza vaccine, but they tend to be mild and go away in a few days. Side effects may include:

- redness where you had the needle that may look red on lighter skin or purple on darker skin
- warmth, swelling, bruising, a hard spot, or feeling sore where you had the needle
- crying or getting upset easily
- feeling tired or unwell
- a headache
- a fever, chills, or sweating
- body aches or sore joints
- poor appetite
- nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- a sore throat, cough, chest tightness, or runny nose
- red eyes

At least 1 out of 100 people who got this vaccine reported 1 or more of these side effects. In some cases, it is unknown if the vaccine caused these side effects.

It is important to stay at the clinic for 15 minutes after your vaccine. Some people may have a rare but serious allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. If anaphylaxis happens, you will get medicine to treat the symptoms. It is rare to have a serious side effect after a vaccine. Call Health Link at 811 to report any serious or unusual side effects.

How can I manage side effects

- To help with soreness and swelling, put a cool, wet cloth over the area where you had the needle.
- There is medicine to help with a fever or pain. Check with your healthcare provider if you are not sure what medicine or dose to take. Follow the directions on the package.
- Some people with health problems, such as a weakened immune system, must call their healthcare provider if they get a fever. If you have been told to do this, call your healthcare provider even if you think the fever is from the vaccine.

What if I had or I am getting another type of vaccine?

You can get the influenza vaccine at the same time, any time before, or any time after other vaccines.

Who may not be able to get the influenza vaccine?

You may not be able to get this vaccine if:

- You have an allergy to any part of the vaccine (except eggs). If you have an allergy to eggs, you can safely get the vaccine. Be sure to tell your healthcare provider about any allergies you may have.
- You had a severe (serious) or unusual side effect after this vaccine or one like it.

If either of these apply, check with your healthcare provider before you get the vaccine.

Although you can get the vaccine if you have a mild illness, such as a cold or fever, it is best to stay home until you are feeling better. This helps prevent spreading your illness to others.

For more information about immunization

Scan the QR code or go to **primarycarealberta.ca/immunize**.

Call Health Link at **811**.

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