

Key Facts about Influenza and the Influenza Vaccine

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Key Facts About Seasonal Flu Vaccine

The single best way to protect against the flu is to get vaccinated each year.

There are two types of vaccines: The "flu shot" — an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle, usually in the arm. The flu shot is approved for use in people older than 6 months, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.

The nasal-spray flu vaccine — a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for "live attenuated influenza vaccine" or FluMist®). LAIV (FluMist®) is approved for use in healthy* people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant. The seasonal flu vaccine protects against three influenza viruses that research indicates will be most common during the upcoming season.

When to Get Vaccinated

Yearly flu vaccination should begin in September or as soon as vaccine is available and continue throughout the influenza season, into December, January, and beyond. This is because the timing and duration of influenza seasons vary. While influenza outbreaks can happen as early as October, most of the time influenza activity peaks in January or later.

Who Should Get Vaccinated

Everyone 6 months and older should get a flu vaccine each year starting with the 2011-2012 influenza season.

While everyone should get a flu vaccine each flu season, it's especially important that the following groups get vaccinated either because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for people at high risk for developing flu-related complications:

Pregnant women

Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old
People 50 years of age and older
People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions
People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:

- Health care workers
- Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu

- Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than 6 months of age (these children are too young to be vaccinated)

Who Should Not Be Vaccinated

There are some people who should not get a flu vaccine without first consulting a physician. These include:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination.
- People who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine.
- Children less than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for this age group)
- People who have a moderate-to-severe illness with a fever (they should wait until they recover to get vaccinated.)

Vaccine Side Effects

(What to Expect) Different side effects can be associated with the flu shot and LAIV.

The flu shot: The viruses in the flu shot are killed (inactivated), so you cannot get the flu from a flu shot. Some minor side effects that could occur are:

- Soreness
- redness
- swelling where the shot was given
- Fever (low grade)
- Aches

If these problems occur, they begin soon after the shot and usually last 1 to 2 days. Almost all people who receive influenza vaccine have no serious problems from it. However, on rare occasions, flu vaccination can cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions.

The nasal spray (also called LAIV or FluMist®): The viruses in the nasal-spray vaccine are weakened and do not cause severe symptoms often associated with influenza illness. (In clinical studies, transmission of vaccine viruses to close contacts has occurred only rarely.)

In children, side effects from LAIV (FluMist®) can include:

- runny nose
- wheezing
- headache
- vomiting
- muscle aches
- fever

In adults, side effects from LAIV (FluMist®) can include:

- runny nose
- headache
- sore throat
- cough

More Information

Flu Shot: Vaccination Information State

If you have questions about whether you should get an influenza vaccination, please consult your health-care provider.