

Q & A: GENERAL INFLUENZA (FLU)

Q: What is the flu?

Influenza, often called the flu, is caused mainly by two types of influenza viruses: influenza A and influenza B. The flu is characterized by the sudden onset of fever, muscle pain, sore throat, and non-productive cough. Unlike other common respiratory illnesses, influenza can cause severe symptoms lasting several days. It can also lead to complications such as pneumonia or worsening of chronic disease.

Q: How is the flu spread?

The flu can spread from person to person through tiny droplets as a result of coughing, sneezing or talking. The virus can also spread when a person touches objects contaminated with infected tiny droplets and then touches their own eyes, mouth or noses before washing their hands.

Transmission predominates among crowded populations in enclosed spaces such as long-term care facilities, schools etc. The incubation period for influenza is usually one to three days and individuals are infectious from one day before symptom onset up to ten days afterwards. It is important to:

- Wash hands often with soap and water, especially after a sneeze or cough. When soap and water are not handy, alcohol-based hand sanitizers are an acceptable alternative.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes.
- Limit touching eyes, nose and mouth.
- Do not share items; such as, drinking glasses, eating utensils, water bottles, mouth guards, or cosmetics.

Q: Where can I find flu awareness and immunization promotion resources?

- Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness (DHW)
- Government of Canada: Flu Awareness Resources
- The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI): Canadian Immunization Guide Chapter on Influenza and Statement on Seasonal Influenza Vaccine for 2018-19
- Immunize Canada
- The World Health Organization (WHO)

Q & A: SEVERE RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES

Q: Should we be concerned about severe respiratory illnesses in other parts of the world (H7N9 and MERS-CoV) affecting Nova Scotians?

Nova Scotia monitors these situations in partnership with federal, provincial and territorial governments. Should a patient in Nova Scotia present with symptoms suggestive of these illnesses, there is a Nova Scotia Respiratory Response Plan that would trigger public health management both at DHW and the Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA). The response plan has been informed by both national and international standards.

Q: Will H1N1 and H7N9 be among the flu strains included in the seasonal flu vaccine?

H1N1 is included. There is no vaccination for H7N9, nor is there an imminent threat of this strain in Nova Scotia or Canada.

Q & A: IMMUNIZATION PROGRAM

Q: Who should get a flu immunization?

All Nova Scotians are encouraged to get the influenza vaccine, but especially people at high risk of complications; including, the elderly, children six months to 5 years, indigenous peoples, pregnant women, anyone with chronic medical conditions such as heart disease, asthma, and diabetes, and those who live with, or care for, individuals in the high-risk groups.

Q: What influenza vaccines are Nova Scotia offering this year?

Nova Scotia is continuing to offer the inactivated quadrivalent influenza vaccine (Flulaval® Tetra and Fluzone® Quadrivalent) for individuals 6 months of age and older. This vaccine provides protection against two Influenza A viruses and two Influenza B viruses.

For the 2018-19 Influenza season Nova Scotia will be offering the high-dose inactivated trivalent influenza vaccine (Fluzone® High-Dose) for residents of long term care facilities [LTCFs (nursing homes and residential care facilities)] who are 65 years of age and older. This vaccine provides protection against two Influenza A viruses and one Influenza B virus. It is expected to provide better protection in comparison to the inactivated quadrivalent influenza vaccine for this age group.

Q: Is the flu immunization still free for the public?

Yes, the publicly funded inactivated quadrivalent influenza vaccine is available free of charge to all Nova Scotians ages 6 months of age and older and the high-dose inactivated trivalent influenza vaccine is free for residents of LTCFs 65 years of age and older. We encourage everyone to get a flu immunization.

Q: Why is the high-dose trivalent influenza vaccine being offered to only residents of LTCFs and not all individuals 65 years of age and older?

Influenza is a significant cause of death and hospitalization in Nova Scotia, especially for residents of settings like LTCFs. Residents are at increased risk of influenza and influenza related complications due to age, compromised health status and institutional living environment. Given these risk factors for residents of LTCFs and the ability of the vaccine to provide superior protection in comparison to the quadrivalent influenza vaccine, this vaccine is offered for free to residents of such facilities. All staff and those residents of LTCFs less than 65 years of age should be offered the quadrivalent influenza vaccine.

Q: Why should I get a flu immunization?

The flu sends thousands of Nova Scotians to doctors, clinics and emergency departments every year and, can cause increased hospitalizations and even death. Immunization is the single most effective way to prevent the flu. It helps Nova Scotians avoid getting the flu themselves and avoids spreading it to family, friends, co-workers and people in their care, such as children in child care facilities and those in health and long-term care facilities.

Q: Where can I get a flu immunization?

Influenza vaccine is available from your primary care provider (family doctor, family practice nurse or nurse practitioner, pharmacists), some workplaces and in some areas of the province through clinics offered by Public Health.

Q: Why do I need to get an immunization every year?

There are many different strains of flu virus. Each year, the vaccine is changed to protect against the strains of flu virus that are expected that year.

Q: How soon following immunization does protection develop?

Protection from the vaccine generally begins 10 to 14 days after immunization and may last 6 months or longer.

Q: What are the adverse reactions to this vaccine?

The most common adverse reaction is pain at the injection site. Tenderness, redness and swelling may also be noted at the injection site. Other common reactions after influenza vaccination include fever, headache and tiredness.

The high-dose influenza vaccine has been associated with higher rates of fever, headaches, sore muscles and tiredness in comparison to the quadrivalent influenza vaccine. Most of these reactions are mild and resolve within a few days.

Anaphylactic reactions rarely occur.

Q: What are the risks and/or precautions related to this vaccine?

Influenza vaccine should not be given to people who have had an allergic reaction to a previous dose or any component of the vaccine. **Individuals with an egg allergy may receive the influenza vaccine.**

Q: Some people say vaccines don't work, or do more harm than good. So why should Nova Scotians get a flu immunization?

There is a lot of misinformation about vaccinations, and about other ways to avoid the flu. However, research shows that vaccination is a safe, simple and effective way to prevent you from getting the flu, and from passing it on to other people. We recommend it for all Nova Scotians aged 6 months and older.

Q: Can anyone get a flu immunization from a pharmacist?

Pharmacists who've been trained have the authority to give the immunization to anyone age 5 or older.

Q: Can I just walk into a pharmacy and get a flu immunization?

Each pharmacy will determine how it offers the flu immunization. Many will set up clinics or take appointments during certain hours.