



Influenza Backgrounder

About Influenza

Influenza is a serious respiratory illness. Each year in the US, on average, influenza and its related complications result in approximately 226,000 hospitalizations.¹ Depending on virus severity during the influenza season, deaths can range from 3000 to a high of about 49,000 people.² Combined with pneumonia, influenza is the eighth leading cause of death in the nation.³

Influenza spreads easily from person-to-person, primarily when an infected individual coughs or sneezes. The disease can be transmitted even before influenza symptoms appear and for many days after the symptoms begin. Typical influenza symptoms include abrupt onset of high fever, muscle and joint pain, chills, a dry cough, headache, runny nose, and a sore throat.⁴

Influenza viruses are divided into 3 types, influenza A, B, and C. Influenza types A and B are responsible for epidemics of respiratory illness that occur almost every winter and are often associated with increased rates of hospitalization and death. Influenza C is rarely reported.⁴

Who is Most at Risk?

We all are “faces” of influenza and are at risk of contracting the virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends everyone 6 months of age and older receive an influenza vaccination.¹ The recommendation reinforces annual influenza vaccination as a public health priority and highlights the need for people to talk to their health-care provider about getting immunized this season.

Vaccination is important for everyone in the US, however, influenza immunization rates in the highest-risk groups fall far short of public health goals every year. Groups at higher risk of developing influenza-related complications include:¹

- People 50 years of age and older
- Children 6 months-18 years of age
- Pregnant women
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease, diabetes, and others
- Residents of long-term care facilities and nursing homes

Additionally, those who come into close contact with high-risk groups should get vaccinated not only to help protect themselves against influenza, but also to help avoid spreading the disease to more vulnerable populations. They include:¹

- Household contacts and caregivers of anyone in a high-risk group, including parents, siblings, grandparents, babysitters, and child care providers
- Health-care personnel

Protection Through Vaccination

While hygiene measures such as washing hands, covering coughs and sneezes, and isolating sick people can help to prevent the spread of disease, vaccination is the best way to help prevent influenza and its complications.¹ Vaccination is safe and effective. Although mild side effects are possible, a person cannot get influenza from the vaccine. Health experts recommend annual influenza immunization for everyone 6 months of age and older.¹

You should be immunized as soon as vaccine is available in the late summer or early fall. If you didn't have a chance to obtain influenza vaccine early in the influenza season, immunization into the spring or as long as the influenza virus is in circulation is beneficial. This is because in most seasons, influenza activity doesn't peak until winter or early spring. In fact, as long as influenza viruses are in circulation, it's a good idea to get vaccinated. It only takes about 2 weeks for the vaccine to protect against the virus.¹

Note: Children younger than 9 years of age receiving an influenza vaccination for the first time need 2 doses approximately 1 month apart.¹

Individuals with severe hypersensitivity to eggs or those who have had a previous vaccine-associated allergic reaction should avoid immunization.¹

Faces of Influenza

Faces of Influenza is an educational campaign from the American Lung Association, made possible through a collaboration with sanofi pasteur. This important initiative is designed to put a "face" on influenza in the US and to show Americans firsthand the seriousness of this potentially deadly infectious disease. The program is intended to help people see themselves, their loved ones, and others among the many "faces" of influenza – people 6 months of age and older who should be immunized against influenza this and every year.

References:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Prevention and control of influenza with vaccines: recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), 2010. *MMWR*. 2010;59(RR-8):1-62.
2. CDC. Estimates of deaths associated with seasonal influenza – United States, 1976-2007. *MMWR*. 2010;59(33):1057-1062.
3. CDC. Deaths: Final data for 2006. National vital statistic reports. 2009. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr57/nvsr57_14.pdf. Accessed March 30, 2010.

4. CDC. Prevention and control of influenza: recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), 2008. *MMWR*. 2008;57(RR-7):1-64.