

The Top 10 Things You Should Know About The Flu

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With Flu season upon us, it is important to know the facts about the Flu Virus itself and the Flu Vaccine. Here, we discuss some truths about both.

1. Why should I get immunized with the flu vaccine?

Flu or influenza is more than a bad cold. The flu has more severe symptoms to include fever, extreme exhaustion, muscle pain, headache, chills and a cough. Recovery is generally prolonged to many weeks. In serious cases such as in the elderly and in individuals with compromised immune systems such as patients in hospitals and long-term care facilities, influenza can lead to pneumonia, critical care hospitalization and death.

"People assume because they don't usually get sick that it is not necessary to get the flu vaccine," says Dr. Mary Vearncombe, Medical Director, Infection Prevention & Control, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre.

"What we need to realize is the flu vaccine is a way to also increase protection for others," says Dr. Vearncombe. "For people like our grandparents with potentially weaker immune systems and or chronic illnesses, the vaccine is less effective. If we receive the flu vaccine, we lower their chances of getting the flu from us which results in added protection for our loved ones."

2. Just how serious is the flu?

Every year the flu causes about 4,000 deaths (mostly in the elderly population), 70,000 hospitalizations and 1.5 million lost days of work in Canada.

3. Can I get the flu from the flu vaccine?

You cannot get influenza from the vaccine. The vaccine is a killed virus and is a 'split virus' in a chemically disrupted preparation.

The benefits of the flu vaccine far outweigh the risks! The most common flu vaccine side effect which may last for a couple of days is soreness at the site of injection. You might also notice fever, fatigue and muscle aches within six to 12 hours after your vaccine and these effects may also last a day or two.

4. "I got the flu last year, even though I had the flu vaccine."

The flu vaccine protects only against influenza, not against other common respiratory viruses such as the cold. The vaccine may take up to two weeks to provide protection so people need to be especially cautious when exposed to influenza-like illnesses during this time.

In healthy adults, the vaccine is 70 to 90 per cent effective. The overall effectiveness of the vaccine varies depending on the match between the vaccine 'split virus', and virus strains circulating in the community.

5. Why do I have to get the flu vaccine every year?

The World Health Organization (WHO) each year recommends the strains of influenza they anticipate will be the largest concern for the coming year to be included in the coming season's vaccine.

It is important to get the flu vaccine every year because the flu virus changes from year to year.

6. When do I get my flu vaccine?

The vaccine is generally available in early to mid-October. Public Health sets up free clinics at places such as shopping malls across the province. You can also visit your private physician for the vaccine which is free to everyone in Ontario. The flu season usually starts in late November to early December. It takes about two weeks for the flu vaccine to provide protection.

7. What else can I do to stay healthy?

- Practice good hygiene before touching the eyes, nose or mouth.
- Frequent, thorough, 15-second hand washings are also important. If washing facilities are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer gel.
- Keep your distance from people who are coughing and sneezing.
- Practice good respiratory etiquette by containing a cough or sneeze in a tissue, or by coughing in the sleeve on your arm. Dispose of used tissue immediately in the garbage and thoroughly wash your hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer gel.
- If you are ill, practice self-quarantine by staying home. Avoid public places and please do not visit elderly friends or family members in a hospital or long-term care home.