

Influenza: Questions and Answers

Information about the disease and vaccines

What causes influenza?

Viruses cause influenza. There are two basic types, A and B. Their genetic material differentiates them. Influenza A can cause moderate to severe illness in all age groups and infects humans and other animals. Influenza B causes milder disease and affects only humans, primarily children. Subtypes of the type A influenza virus are identified by two antigens (proteins involved in the immune reaction) on the surface of the virus. These antigens can change, or mutate, over time. When a "shift" (major change) or a "drift" (minor change) occurs, a new influenza virus is born and an epidemic is likely among the unprotected population.

How does influenza spread?

Influenza is transmitted through the air from the respiratory tract of an infected person. It can also be transmitted by direct contact with respiratory droplets.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Typical influenza disease is characterized by abrupt onset of fever, aching muscles, sore throat, and non-productive cough. Additional symptoms may include runny nose, headache, a burning sensation in the chest, and eye pain and sensitivity to light. Typical influenza disease does not occur in every infected person. Someone who has been previously exposed to similar virus strains (through natural infection or vaccination) is less likely to develop serious clinical illness.

What is the best way to prevent influenza?

The best way to prevent influenza is with annual vaccination.

Who should get influenza vaccine?

Many groups of people can benefit from being protected from influenza.

Annual vaccination with inactivated vaccine is recommended for the following groups:

- All persons, including school-age children, who want to reduce the risk of becoming ill with influenza or of transmitting influenza to others
- Everyone age 50 years or older
- All children age 6-59 months
- Residents of long-term care facilities, nursing homes, and other chronic-care facilities
- Adults and children who have chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, hematological or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus)
- Anyone who has a condition (e.g., spinal cord injury or seizure disorder) that can affect their ability to cough out their respiratory secretions or that can increase the risk for aspiration
- Anyone whose immune system is weakened because of the following: HIV/AIDS or other diseases that affect the immune system, long-term treatment with drugs such as steroids, or cancer treatment with x-rays or drugs
- Children and adolescents age 6 months-18 years on long-term aspirin treatment (who could develop Reye's syndrome if they catch influenza)
- Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season
- Healthcare personnel
- Healthy household contacts (including children) and caregivers of children younger than age 5 years and/or adults age 50 years and older
- Healthy household contacts (including children) and caregivers of persons with medical conditions that put them at higher risk for severe complications from influenza

The live nasal spray vaccine may only be used in healthy, non-pregnant persons age 2 through 49 years. Children younger than age two years, persons age 50 and older, and anyone with a chronic medical condition (listed above) should receive inactivated influenza vaccine (injectable), NOT live influenza vaccine.