

Influenza



UHN

Helping You Beat the Flu

Patient Education
Improving Health Through Education

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Toronto General Hospital Toronto Western Hospital Princess Margaret Hospital

What is Influenza?

Influenza is better known as “the flu”. It is caused by a virus. The specific type (or strain) of virus changes from year to year. People usually experience sudden symptoms such as sore throat, cough, fever, muscle aches, headache and sometimes weakness. People typically get the flu during the fall and winter months. When they get it, the flu can last from 2 - 7 days.

How can I get the flu?

The flu spreads from person to person in drops of mucous that exit the nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing. Also, if you touch surfaces or objects contaminated with the flu virus, and then touch your nose or mouth, you may get the flu.

Can I give the flu to my family and friends?

Yes, you can.

You can, however, prevent the spread of the flu by covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. You should also dispose your tissues properly, and wash your hands frequently during the day.

Who is at risk for getting the flu?

Each year over 25% of Canadians get sick with the flu. Some people have a higher risk for getting the flu. Age and health status affects your risk. The list below shows you who is at higher risk.

- People over the age of 65
- Children under the age of 2
- People with immune system problems (such as those going through cancer treatments)
- People with diabetes
- People with chronic lung disease (bronchitis)
- People with heart disease
- Anyone in a long term care center
- Children and teens (age 6 months to 18 years) who have been treated with acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) for long periods

How do I prevent getting the flu?

Wash your hands.

Washing your hands frequently throughout the day is good for 2 reasons:



1. If you are sick with the flu, hand washing will prevent you from contaminating surfaces with the flu virus. This will prevent the spread to your friends and family.
2. If you are around someone who has the flu and wash your own hands frequently, you are less likely to have contaminated hands when you touch your nose or mouth.

For people who are sick with flu symptoms, it is best to cover your cough, and to wash your hands after sneezing or blowing your nose. This will prevent the spread of your illness to others.

What else can I do?

The Influenza vaccination!

The Ministry of Health and Health Canada encourages you to get the flu shot. You can get it for free at any Public Health Flu clinic.

Toronto Public health clinic locations can be found at

http://www.toronto.ca/health/flu_facts.htm or you may call

1-866-FLU-‘N-YOU (1-866-358-6968). You may also find more information about the flu on the Health Canada website

<http://www.health.gov.on.ca>.

You can also get your flu shot from:

- Your family doctor
- Your employer if they offer the service
- A medical clinic

Can I get the flu from the flu shot?

No.

The vaccine is made from particles of **inactive** flu virus, usually containing three different strains. After you receive your vaccination, your system develops immunity in about 2 weeks to these strains of the flu virus.

Sometimes a new strain of the flu emerges while the vaccine is being made. You will not be immune to this new strain from your flu shot.

Sometimes, people find that they get a cold or flu-like symptoms after receiving the flu shot. Since the flu occurs during the same seasons as the common cold, chances are that you are suffering from another illness or a different uncommon strain of the flu, and not from the flu shot.



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Is it a cold or the flu?

Symptom	Cold	Influenza
Fever	Rare	Usual high fever (39 - 40 °C) or (102 - 104 °F)
Headache	Rare	Usual, can be severe
General aches and pains	Sometimes, mild	Usual, often severe
Fatigue and weakness	Sometimes, mild	Usual severe may last 2-3 weeks or more
Extreme fatigue	Unusual	Usual early onset, can be severe
Runny, stuffy nose	Common	Common
Sneezing	Common	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Common
Chest discomfort, Coughing	Sometimes, mild to moderate	Usual, can be severe
Complications	Can lead to sinus congestion or earache	Can lead to pneumonia and respiratory failure, can worsen a current chronic condition, can be life-threatening
Prevention	Frequent handwashing	Annual vaccination and frequent handwashing

Why do I need a shot every year?

The flu shot wears off after about 6 months.

At the same time, different strains of the flu occur on a yearly basis; therefore the shot you received last year may not entirely protect you against new flu strains this year.



When is the best time to get the flu shot?

Flu season begins usually in October and runs until early spring. October to mid-November is the best time to get your flu shot. Please remember to have this vaccination written down in your personal immunization record.

What are the common side effects from the flu shot?

- a sore arm at the vaccination site
- muscle aches
- low-grade fever
- tiredness

Less common side effects include:

- watery eyes
- chest tightness or wheezing
- mild swollen or sore throat

If these symptoms do not disappear, please see your doctor.

Seek medical attention **immediately** if you have any of the following symptoms after getting the flu shot:

- hives
- swelling of the face or mouth
- trouble breathing
- dizziness
- fast heart beat
- chest tightness/trouble breathing

Who should not get the flu shot?

1. If your doctor advises you against it because of your medical history
2. You are allergic to
 - eggs
 - thimersol
 - neomycin
 - gelatin

What is the UHN doing to protect in-patients from the flu?

The UHN Infection Prevention and Control Unit is working hard to prevent the spread of influenza among our patients through research, surveillance and educational activities.

“The Bug Stops Here” is our ongoing campaign geared to inform and educate every staff member about excellent infection control practices. All new patients are screened for the following symptoms:

- new cough or shortness of breath
- fever in the last 24 hours
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhea

Family and friends of patients are also asked to screen themselves and not to visit our hospital if they are feeling ill.

As well as the Infection Prevention and Control team, our Occupational Health Service and Employee Communicable Diseases Surveillance Unit (ECDS) are working hard to prevent the spread of influenza among our staff members. All employees are asked to screen themselves for signs and symptoms of illness and are encouraged to stay home until they feel better. Every year during October, they launch the “Flu Challenge” across our three UHN sites with a goal to vaccinate as many staff as possible.

If you are an in-patient at the University Health Network (UHN), please ask your doctor or nurse about receiving the flu shot. Depending on your medical condition, we may be able to give it to you.

What if I have the flu and I am a patient at the UHN?

If you become ill with the flu and become a patient in our hospital, you may be placed under special **“Droplet precautions”**. These precautions include the use of a mask and goggles when your healthcare worker or your family and friends are within three feet (1 meter) of you. You may or may not be placed in a single room. You, your visitors, and the staff must frequently wash their hands. This will prevent the spread of the flu virus.

Why are these special precautions necessary?

We do not want to spread the flu to anyone else. These precautions are necessary to prevent droplets of mucous that exit your nose and mouth during coughing and sneezing from coming in contact with the nose,



mouth or eyes of anyone who comes in contact with you (e.g. your family, the staff, other visitors, or other patients in the hospital).

How long will these special precautions last?

These precautions will last until your symptoms (coughing, sneezing, fever etc.) have disappeared and you are feeling better.

Who can I talk to if I have concerns?

The University Health Network Infection Prevention & Control team is always available to answer your questions. If you wish to know more about Influenza, please ask your nurse to contact the Infection Control Practitioner dedicated to your unit. You may also e-mail us at: infectioncontrol@uhn.on.ca. If you have specific questions regarding your plan of care, please contact your doctor or nurse.

Acknowledgement:

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Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) is a corporate service for UHN's three hospitals. We monitor all in-patient floors and support service areas. Our mandate is to increase the quality of patient care by identifying sources of infections and preventing their spread through surveillance, education, and consultation.