



Flu Season—Ready or Not, Here It Comes!

By Merilla Hopkins, Lincoln Hospital Pharmacy Director



What is Influenza (also called Flu)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu **vaccination** each fall.

Every year in the United States, on average:

- 5% to 20% of the population gets the flu;
- over 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications
- about 36,000 people die from flu.

Symptoms of Flu

Fever (usually high), headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches, stomach symptoms, such as nausea vomiting, and diarrhea, also can occur but are more common in children than adults.

Complications of Flu

Complications of flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

How Flu Spreads

Flu viruses spread mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing of people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day **before** symptoms develop and up to 5 days **after** becoming sick. *That means that you may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.*

Preventing the Flu: Get Vaccinated

There are two types of vaccines:

- The "flu shot" – an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people 6 months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal spray flu vaccine – a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu. It is approved for use in healthy people 5 years to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

What Everyone Should Know about Influenza and Influenza Vaccine

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses.

When to Get Vaccinated

October or November is the best time to get vaccinated, but getting vaccinated in December or even later can still be beneficial since most influenza activity occurs in January or later in most years. Though it varies, flu season can last as late as May.

Who Should Get Vaccinated?

Anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting the flu can get vaccinated. However, certain people should get vaccinated each year either because they are at high risk of having serious flu related complications or because they live with or care for high risk persons. They are:

1. People at high risk for complications from the flu, including:

- Children aged 6–59 months of age,
- Pregnant women,
- People 50 years of age and older,
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions, and
- People who live in nursing homes and other long term care facilities.

2. People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:

- Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu (see above)
- Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than 6 months of age (these children are too young to be vaccinated)
- Health care workers.

Who Should Not Be Vaccinated

Some people should not be vaccinated without first consulting a physician. They include:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past.
- People who developed Guillain Barré syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine previously.
- Children less than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for use in this age group).
- People who have a moderate or severe illness with a fever should wait to get vaccinated until their symptoms lessen.