Immunization has saved more lives in Canada in the last 50 years than any other medical intervention.¹ Vaccines help the immune system to recognize and fight bacteria and viruses that cause disease.

What is seasonal influenza?
Seasonal influenza (the flu) is a respiratory infection caused by a virus. Not everyone who gets the flu develops symptoms but they can still spread it to others, especially if they cough or sneeze. The flu can seem similar to the common cold, but the signs and symptoms of the flu are usually more severe. Sudden high fever, body aches, extreme tiredness and dry cough are more common with the flu than the common cold. Other common symptoms include headache, chills, loss of appetite and sore throat. Nausea and upset stomach may also occur, especially in young children. The flu can lead to more serious problems like pneumonia and bacterial infections, sometimes resulting in hospitalization.

The flu can spread easily from person to person through coughing, sneezing or sharing food or drinks. You can also get the flu by touching objects contaminated with flu virus and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose. For this reason, it’s important to cover your nose and mouth with your forearm when you cough or sneeze and wash your hands often with soap and water (or hand sanitizer if soap and water are unavailable), especially after coughing and sneezing.

The flu season in Manitoba usually begins in the fall and lasts into the spring. For your protection, you and your child(ren) should get immunized early in the fall before the flu starts to circulate.

What is the flu vaccine?
There are many different strains of flu virus that circulate each year. The flu vaccine does not protect against all of them. Every year, scientists monitor the global spread of flu and decide which four flu strains will likely cause the most illness during the flu season. Those four strains are then put into the flu vaccine for that year so each year, the vaccine is different. For this reason and because protection provided by the vaccine decreases over time, it’s important to get the flu vaccine every fall.

The flu vaccine cannot offer protection against other viruses or bacteria that cause the common cold or stomach flu.

There are two flu vaccines approved by Health Canada and available free-of-charge in Manitoba. Both vaccines are safe and will not cause the flu because the inactivated influenza vaccine does not contain live viruses, and the viruses in the live attenuated influenza vaccine are weakened so it cannot cause the flu either. The inactivated influenza vaccine is given by injection (needle) to people six months of age and older whereas the live attenuated influenza vaccine is a nasal spray for people two to 59 years of age.

Why should people get the flu vaccine?
Immunization is the best way to protect you and your child(ren) against the flu that can often be serious and sometimes fatal.

Vaccines help prepare your body to fight potential future exposure to the flu by getting your immune system ready.

The vaccine helps protect you, your family and other people in your community.

Who should get the flu vaccine?
An annual flu vaccine is available free-of-charge to all Manitobans six months of age and older as part of Manitoba’s routine immunization schedule.

You and your child(ren) should get immunized early in the fall before the flu starts to circulate.

An annual flu vaccine is especially important for Manitobans at increased risk of serious illness from

¹ The Public Health Agency of Canada
the flu, their caregivers and close contacts. This includes:

- People 65 years of age and older
- Residents of personal care homes or long-term care facilities
- Children six to 59 months of age
- Individuals with the following chronic health conditions:
  - An immune system weakened by disease or medical treatment
  - Cardiac or pulmonary disorders (ex: cystic fibrosis, asthma)
  - Individuals aged six months to 18 years on long-term acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin®) therapy
  - Neurologic or neurodevelopmental conditions
  - Diabetes and other metabolic diseases
  - Renal disease
  - Anemia or hemoglobinopathy
  - Obesity (body mass index ≥40)
- Pregnant women
- Health care workers and first responders
- Regular caregivers of children up to five years of age
- Indigenous peoples

There are two types of flu vaccines available as part of Manitoba’s Seasonal Influenza Immunization Program. Healthy children two to 17 years of age can be immunized with live attenuated influenza vaccine (nasal spray). A small number of healthy adults up to 59 years of age who are needle averse may also be immunized with live attenuated influenza vaccine (nasal spray). All other people aged six months and older can receive the inactivated influenza vaccine (needle).

Children younger than nine years of age who have NEVER received a flu vaccine need two doses, at least four weeks apart.

Who should NOT get the flu vaccine?

Anyone who has had a severe allergic reaction to a previous dose of any flu vaccine or to any of the contents of any flu vaccine (excluding eggs), or who has developed Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) within six weeks after receiving any flu vaccine, should not get vaccinated against the flu.

There is no need to delay immunization because of a cold or other mild illness. However, if you are concerned, speak with a health care provider.

In addition, the following people should NOT get the live attenuated influenza vaccine (nasal spray):

- Children less than two years of age
- Anyone with severe asthma as defined as currently on oral or high-dose inhaled glucocorticosteroids or active wheezing, or those with medically attended wheezing in the seven days prior to immunization
- Individuals two to 17 years of age on long-term Aspirin® treatment in the last four weeks
- Pregnant women
- Anyone with an immune system weakened by disease or medical treatment
- Adults with any chronic medical condition
- Adults older than 59 years of age

Children under six months of age should not receive the inactivated influenza vaccine (needle).

Other precautions and special considerations

Discuss with your health care provider prior to getting immunized with live attenuated influenza vaccine (nasal spray), if you or your child(ren) will either be in contact with someone who is severely immunocompromised (ex: post bone marrow transplant recipients), or are taking (or have taken) antiviral medication in the past two weeks.

Possible side-effects of the flu vaccine

It is much safer to get the vaccine than to get the flu. Health Canada approves vaccines based on a review of quality and safety.
The most common side-effects of the inactivated influenza vaccine (needle) are soreness, redness or swelling where the vaccine was given. Other symptoms are fever, headache and tiredness. Acetaminophen (Tylenol®, Tempra® or generic versions) can be given for fever or soreness.

Common reactions to the live attenuated influenza vaccine (nasal spray) may include a runny or stuffy nose.

Acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin® or generic versions) should NEVER be given to children because it can cause a severe liver and brain disease called Reye's Syndrome.

Some people have experienced oculo-respiratory syndrome (ORS) that starts within 24 hours of receiving a flu vaccine. ORS is defined as the presence of bilateral red eyes with (or without) swelling of the face plus one or more of the following: cough, wheeze, chest tightness, difficulty breathing and swallowing, hoarseness or sore throat. Talk to your health care provider if you or your child(ren) have previously experienced ORS after receiving a flu vaccine.

It's important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine because there is a rare possibility of a severe allergic reaction. This can include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat, tongue or lips. If this happens after you leave the clinic, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department or health centre for immediate attention.

Report any serious or unexpected side-effects to a health care provider.

Your record of protection

All immunizations including the flu vaccine are recorded on an individual's immunization record in Manitoba's immunization registry. This registry:

• allows health care providers to find out which immunizations you or your child(ren) have had or need to have;

• may be used to produce immunization records or notify you or your health care provider if a particular immunization has been missed; and,

• allows Manitoba Health, Seniors and Active Living and public health officials to monitor how well vaccines work in preventing disease.

The Personal Health Information Act protects your information and/or that of your child(ren). You can have your personal health information and/or that of your child(ren) hidden from view from health care providers; talk to your health care provider for more information.

Public health nurses are able to provide a copy of the immunizations that you or your child(ren) have received. For a listing of public health offices, visit: www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/offices.html.

For more information on the flu or the flu vaccine:

Talk to your health care provider.

Call Health Links–Info Santé in Winnipeg at 204-788-8200; toll-free elsewhere in Manitoba 1-888-315-9257.

Or, visit:

Manitoba’s Seasonal Influenza Program: www.gov.mb.ca/health/flu/index.html