

Manitoba's Seasonal Influenza Immunization Program - Questions and Answers

Public Health – Factsheet

Immunization is one of the most important accomplishments in public health. Over the past 50 years, immunization has led to the elimination, containment, and control of diseases that were once very common in Canada.¹ Vaccines help your immune system recognize and fight bacteria and viruses that cause diseases.

What is seasonal influenza (the flu)?

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 the flu to others. The flu may seem similar to other respiratory viruses or the common cold. However, the symptoms are usually more severe than the common cold. These symptoms could include sudden high fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, sore throat, and dry cough. Nausea and upset stomach may also occur, especially in young children. The flu can lead to more serious problems like pneumonia, which could lead to hospitalization.

The seasonal flu should not be confused with what is commonly known as the “stomach flu”. Other circulating viruses that affect primarily the stomach with symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea cause the “stomach flu”.

How is the flu spread?

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 the flu virus and then touching your mouth, eyes, or nose.

People who have the flu can spread it to others up to 6 feet away and a person can infect others one day before and up to 5 days after symptoms appear.

For this reason, in addition to getting the vaccine each year, it is important to cover your nose and mouth with your forearm when you cough or sneeze, avoid touching your face, and wash your hands with soap and water (or alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are unavailable), especially after coughing and sneezing.

What do I do if I, or my child(ren), have the flu?

If you or your child(ren) get a respiratory infection, it is important to stay home, isolate, and follow public health recommendations and guidance. Contact Health Links – Info Santé or your health care provider to see if you or your child(ren) need assessment and/or medical treatment.

They will also give you information on how long to isolate for, as well as information on how to care for yourself or your child(ren) at home.

Most people can treat their symptoms and recover at home. If symptoms worsen, or, if you or your child(ren) are not recovering as you normally would, contact your health care provider or call Health Links – Info Santé at (204) 788-8200 or toll-free 1-888-315-9257.

Some symptoms can be very serious and require urgent medical care and treatment. Call 911 or go directly to an emergency room, nursing station, or health centre if you or a loved one is experiencing any severe symptoms, such as:

- shortness of breath or difficulty breathing that persists or worsens
- severe weakness
- dehydration or no urination for 12 hours
- drowsiness or confusion
- fever in an infant under three months of age

People who are normally healthy and have symptoms of the flu should seek medical attention as soon as possible if they experience any of the following:

- difficult or painful breathing
- coughing up bloody sputum (phlegm or saliva)
- wheezing
- fever for three to four days that is not getting better or is getting worse
- sudden return of high fever or other symptoms after initial improvement
- extreme ear pain
- feel severely ill

What is the difference between the influenza strains?

Influenza illness may be caused by influenza A and B viruses. A flu infection can result in mild to severe illness in anyone who is infected regardless of the strain involved.

¹ The Public Health Agency of Canada

Questions and Answers about Manitoba's Seasonal Influenza Immunization Program

Certain populations, such as young children, seniors, and those with medical conditions may be at higher risk for further complications.

What is the flu vaccine?

Many different strains of flu virus circulate each year. The flu vaccine does not protect against all of them. Every year, scientists track the global spread of flu. They use this data to predict which flu strains will likely cause the most illness in the next flu season. These strains are then used to develop the flu vaccine for that year. As a result, the vaccine can be different each year. For this reason, and because protection provided by the vaccine decreases over time, it is important to get the flu vaccine every year.

The flu vaccine cannot offer protection against other viral or bacterial infections, including illnesses like the common cold, stomach flu, or other respiratory illnesses such as COVID-19.

What flu vaccines are available in Manitoba?

There are many different flu vaccines approved by Health Canada. The standard and high-dose influenza vaccines are available through Manitoba's Influenza Immunization Program for free.

Both the standard-dose and high-dose influenza vaccine protect against four (two flu A and two flu B) flu strains that are most likely to cause illness. Both are inactivated vaccines and are given by injection (needle) to people.

For specific details about any of the ingredients in the flu vaccines, please visit the vaccine manufacturers' product monographs found at www.manitoba.ca/health/flu/resources.html or speak with your health care provider.

Why is the high-dose influenza vaccine recommended for those 65 years of age and older?

The high-dose flu vaccine is the recommended vaccine product for Manitobans' 65 years and older.

The high-dose flu vaccine contains four times the amount of influenza virus proteins (or antigens). The antigen is the part of the vaccine that helps your body build up immunity. The higher amounts of influenza virus proteins in the high-dose flu vaccine can boost immune response in older adults against flu. This can provide a higher level of protection against severe flu and its complications.

Is the flu vaccine effective?

The flu vaccine has been shown to be effective against laboratory-confirmed influenza. Flu immunization has shown to reduce the severity of illness in people who get vaccinated but still get sick. It has also been demonstrated to reduce the number of physician visits, hospitalizations and deaths among those at highest risk of influenza and its complications, including:

- people 65 years of age and older
- residents of personal care homes or long-term care facilities
- children six months to five years of age
- individuals with a chronic health condition (e.g. diabetes, asthma, etc.)
- pregnant and breastfeeding individuals
- health care workers and first responders
- regular caregivers of children up to five years of age
- household contacts of anyone at highest risk including those with infants under six months of age or expecting a newborn
- Indigenous peoples
- people who are in direct contact with poultry infected with avian influenza during culling operations

Flu vaccine effectiveness can vary each year and is dependent on how closely the strains that are in the vaccine match the circulating strains.

Being immunized against the flu is the best way to prevent getting sick from the flu.

When should people get immunized against the flu?

Manitoba Health recommends Manitobans get immunized against influenza each year in early fall.

In Manitoba, the flu season generally begins in late fall and lasts into spring. For this reason, and because the flu vaccine takes about two weeks to start fully working, the earlier people get immunized, the better.

Who should get the flu vaccine?

All Manitobans six months of age and older should get the flu vaccine in early fall every year.

Most Manitobans should receive the standard-dose vaccine. Manitobans 65 years of age and older are eligible to receive the high-dose influenza vaccine free of charge.

Questions and Answers about Manitoba's Seasonal Influenza Immunization Program

Getting immunized against the flu every year is especially important for Manitobans who are at increased risk of serious illness from the flu, their caregivers, and their close contacts. However, there are also benefits for healthy individuals to be immunized against the flu.

When more people are immunized, it may help reduce the spread of influenza. This protects those who are at increased risk of serious illness from the flu.

Is the flu vaccine safe for pregnant and breastfeeding women?

Flu vaccination is safe for pregnant and breastfeeding individuals and their infants aged six months and older. It is recommended that all pregnant individuals get their flu vaccine.

When a pregnant or breastfeeding individual receives a flu vaccine, antibodies against the flu can be shared with the infant through the placenta or breast milk. This will protect young infants who are not old enough to receive the flu vaccine.

For more information, please visit:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-3-vaccination-specific-populations/page-4-immunization-pregnancy-breastfeeding.html>

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization-vaccines/vaccination-pregnancy-during.html>

What if I, or my child(ren), have an allergy to eggs?

Many of the flu vaccines available in Canada are manufactured by a process involving chicken eggs. This may result in the flu vaccine containing trace amounts of egg protein.

Public health officials have reviewed the data and determined that it is safe for egg-allergic individuals to be immunized with any of the flu vaccines available in Manitoba and Canada.

If you have any concerns, please speak with your health care provider.

Is there mercury in flu vaccines?

Flu vaccines that are in a vial with multiple doses contain thimerosal. Single-dose flu vaccines do not contain thimerosal.

Thimerosal is a mercury-based preservative that keeps the vaccine sterile by preventing bacterial or fungal growth. It contains a type of mercury known as ethylmercury. It is different from the type of mercury found in fish and seafood (methylmercury), which can be toxic at very high levels.

The small amount of thimerosal used in a vaccine is proven to be safe. Countless scientific studies have proven that there is no association between thimerosal-containing vaccines and neurodevelopmental conditions (i.e., autism). Vaccine manufacturers have also voluntarily changed their production methods to reduce or eliminate thimerosal. They have done this because it is possible to do, not because there was any evidence that the thimerosal was harmful.

For more information, please visit Vaccine Safety (immunize.org).

If you are concerned, please speak to your health care provider.

Can I get the flu from the vaccine?

Flu vaccines cannot cause the flu. The inactivated influenza vaccines contain particles of killed viruses.

Sometimes after getting the flu vaccine, a person may get flu-like symptoms such as chills and aches. This is the body's immune system learning what the virus looks like and preparing itself to fight an infection if you are exposed to the flu virus in the future.

Can you get the flu vaccine while on medication?

Generally, yes, you can get your flu vaccine while on medications. If you have any concerns, contact your health care provider.

Can I get flu and COVID-19 vaccines at the same time?

Yes. You can get other vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine, together or any time before or after the flu vaccine.

Where can someone get the flu vaccine?

Free flu vaccine is being offered at a variety of locations such as public health offices, medical clinics, pharmacies, vaccine clinics, and nursing stations.

Questions and Answers about Manitoba's Seasonal Influenza Immunization Program

You can contact your health care provider or refer to the Vaccine Finder Map (www.manitoba.ca/covid19/vaccine.html#finder) to find the location nearest you.

Pharmacists are authorized to provide flu and COVID-19 vaccines to people 2 years of age and older.

Remember to contact your health care provider first to check for flu, COVID-19, and/or pneumococcal vaccine availability.

For more information on the flu and the flu vaccine:

Talk to a 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:**
manitoba.ca/health/flu/