HALDIMAND-NORFOLK HEALTH UNIT

HEALTHINFO

CLINICAL SERVICES

Seasonal Influenza (Flu) Vaccine

What is influenza?

Influenza (the flu) is an infection of the respiratory tract (nose, throat and lungs) caused by the influenza virus. It is usually much worse than a cold. Typically you will have a high fever, headache, loss of appetite, muscle aches and pain, fatigue, weakness, chills, dry cough, sweating, sore throat, runny nose, nasal congestion and sneezing. Influenza can leave you bedridden for five to 10 days. It lowers your body's ability to fight off other infections and can lead to pneumonia or bronchitis. It can also worsen a current medical condition such as lung and heart disease or diabetes, resulting in hospitalization. In the elderly or chronically ill, death can occur.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza is easy to catch and easily spread to others. It is spread by droplets released into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes without covering his/her mouth or nose. You can catch the flu by breathing in these droplets through your mouth or nose or if the droplets land in your eyes. You can also catch it by touching the unwashed hands of a person with the flu and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes, or by touching surfaces that have been contaminated by the virus then touching your mouth, nose or eyes. The virus can live up to 48 hours on surfaces such as countertops, telephones, computer keyboards, doorknobs and toys. You can come in contact with the flu virus and spread it to others before you become ill.

When should the vaccine be given?

It is necessary to get a seasonal influenza vaccine every year.

Each year the flu vaccine changes to provide protection against the strains of the influenza virus that are expected to be circulating that year. Maximum protection develops approximately two weeks after vaccination and lasts from four months to one year.

Children age six months through eight years who are receiving the seasonal influenza vaccine for the first time should receive two doses; with the second dose given after a four week interval. Eligible children less than 9 years old who have properly received one or more doses of the influenza vaccine in the past are recommended to receive only one dose this flu season and annually from now on.

How effective is the vaccine?

As with any vaccine, vaccination may not protect 100% of all susceptible persons. However, with a good match to circulating flu strains, vaccination has been shown to prevent illness in approximately 70 to 90% of healthy children and adults. You may still get the flu, but will likely have milder symptoms. Your flu vaccination cannot give you the flu because it is not made from a live virus.

Who should get the vaccine?

People at high risk of influenza-related complications or those more likely to require hospitalization

- Adults (including pregnant women) and children with the following chronic health conditions:
  - cardiac or pulmonary disorders (including bronchopulmonary dysplasia, cystic fibrosis and asthma)
  - diabetes mellitus and other metabolic diseases
  - cancer, immunodeficiency, immunosuppression (due to underlying disease and/or therapy)
  - renal disease
  - anemia or hemoglobinopathy
  - children and adolescents with conditions treated for long periods with acetylsalicylic acid.

- People of any age who are residents of nursing homes and other chronic care facilities.
- People ≥ 65 years of age.
- Healthy children 6 to 23 months of age.
- Healthy pregnant women (the risk of influenza-related hospitalization increases with length of gestation, i. e. it is higher in the third than in the second trimester).

People capable of transmitting influenza to those at high risk

- Health care and other care providers in facilities and community settings who, through their activities, are capable of transmitting influenza to those at high risk of influenza complications.
- Household contacts (adults and children) of individuals at high risk of influenza-related complications (whether or not the individual at high risk has been immunized):
  - household contacts of infants <6 months of age who are at high risk of complications from influenza but for whom influenza vaccine is not authorized ; and
  - members of a household expecting a newborn during the influenza season.
- Those providing regular child care to children <24 months of age, whether in or out of the home.
- Those who provide services within closed or relatively closed settings to persons at high risk (e. g. crew on a ship).

Others

- People who provide essential community services.
- People in direct contact during culling operations with poultry infected with avian influenza.

Who should NOT get the vaccine?

- Infants less than six months of age.
- Anyone who has a serious (anaphylactic-type) allergy to eggs, egg products, chicken or chicken protein. Thimerosal, Neomycin, or Formaldehyde. If you think you have a serious allergy to any of these then it should be discussed with your health care provider.
  There is more than one manufacturer of influenza vaccine and not all of these components are used in the manufacturing process.
- Anyone with a fever.
- Persons with active neurological disorders (e.g., Guillain-Barre Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis) need to be seen by their physician.
- People who have experienced Oculorespiratory Syndrome (ORS) symptoms, attributable to previous vaccine should seek the advice of an allergy or immunology expert to determine whether it was ORS and not a hypersensitivity immune response.
- Persons who have a history of a serious reaction to the flu vaccine or any other vaccine (discuss any previous reactions with your health care provider).

Why should children and adults get the flu vaccine?

- To protect themselves from getting the flu and possible serious complications.
- To avoid spreading the flu to others, especially those persons who are at higher risk for developing complications associated with the flu.
- To help lessen the burden on the health care system by reducing visits to doctors' offices, clinics and hospitals.
- The vaccine is 70 to 90% effective in preventing the flu in healthy adults.
- In children, the vaccine is approximately 80 to 90% effective in preventing the flu and approximately 60 to 70% effective in preventing illness and fever.
- To avoid losing time from work and social activities.

Are there side effects from the vaccine?

Influenza vaccine is safe, but like any other medication, side effects can occur. Soreness, redness and slight swelling where the vaccine was given are common. These may last up to two days, but should not interfere with normal activities. Mild fever, fatigue and muscle aches may occur within six to 12 hours after the vaccine is given, especially if this is the first time you have received the vaccine. These symptoms should disappear within one to two days.
Should you experience any of the following symptoms in the next two weeks, contact your family doctor or go to the nearest emergency room immediately and tell the doctor when you received the influenza vaccine:

- High fever.
- Hives.
- Swelling of the lips, tongue or face.
- Difficulty breathing/swallowing.
- Lasting or worsening weakness.
- Dizziness.
- Convulsions.

For more information, please contact a member of the Vaccine Preventable Disease Team by calling the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit at 519- 426-6170 or 905-318-6623.

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