

Q & A: GENERAL INFLUENZA (FLU)

Q: What is the flu?

Influenza, often called the flu, is caused mainly by two types of influenza viruses: influenza A and influenza B. The flu is characterized by the sudden onset of fever, muscle pain, sore throat, and non-productive cough. Unlike other common respiratory illnesses, influenza can cause severe symptoms lasting several days. It can also lead to complications such as pneumonia, worsening of chronic disease or death

Q: How is the flu spread?

The flu can spread from person to person through tiny droplets caused by coughing, sneezing, or talking. The virus can also spread when a person touches objects contaminated with infected tiny droplets and then touches their own eyes, mouth, or noses before washing their hands.

Flu spreads easily in crowded places, enclosed spaces, and those places with poor ventilation. Outbreaks frequently occur in long-term care facilities, schools, and some businesses. An individual infected with the flu virus shows symptoms one to four days after being exposed. Infected individuals can spread the virus to others from one day before symptoms develop and up to ten days afterwards. It is important to prevent transmission of influenza by:

- Frequently washing hands with soap and water, especially after a sneeze or cough. When soap and water are not handy, alcohol-based hand sanitizers are an acceptable alternative.
- Cough into a crook of your arm or use a tissue which is immediately disposed of into a garbage can.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Not sharing personal items such as drinking glasses, eating utensils, water bottles, mouth guards, or cosmetics.

Q: Where can I find flu awareness and immunization promotion resources?

- Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness (DHW)
- Government of Canada: Flu Awareness Resources
- The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI): Canadian Immunization Guide Chapter on Influenza and Statement on Seasonal Influenza Vaccine for 2021-22
- Immunize Canada
- The World Health Organization (WHO)
- Guidance for Influenza Vaccine Delivery in the Presence of COVID-19

Q & A: SEVERE RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES

Q: Should we be concerned about severe respiratory illnesses in other parts of the world (H7N9 and MERS-CoV) affecting Nova Scotians?

Nova Scotia monitors these situations in partnership with federal, provincial, and territorial governments.

The Nova Scotia Respiratory Response Plan triggers public health management both at the Department of Health and Wellness (DHW) and Nova Scotia Health (NSHA) should a patient in Nova Scotia present with symptoms suggestive of these illnesses. The response plan has been informed by both national and international standards.

Q: Will H1N1 and H7N9 be among the flu strains included in the seasonal flu vaccine?

H1N1 is included. There is no vaccination for H7N9, nor is there an imminent threat of this strain in Nova Scotia or Canada.

Q & A: IMMUNIZATION PROGRAM

Q: Who should get a flu immunization?

All Nova Scotians are encouraged to get the influenza vaccine. Especially people at high risk of complications; including:

- adults 65 years of age and older,
- children six months to 5 years of age,
- pregnant women,
- individuals with chronic medical conditions (heart disease, asthma, diabetes),
- Indigenous peoples*.
- People capable of transmitting influenza to those at high risk of severe illness from influenza are recommended to receive the influenza vaccine this fall. (This includes healthcare providers in facilities and community settings, household contacts (adults and children) of individuals at high risk, household contacts of children under 6 months, households expecting a newborn during influenza season, those providing childcare to children 0-59 months and those providing services within closed or relatively closed settings - e.g., working on a ship).

**There is a higher risk of flu-related complications and/or hospitalization for Indigenous peoples. This is a result of multiple factors, including a high occurrence of chronic health conditions, reduced access to health care, and other social and environmental factors such as poor housing conditions*

Q: What publicly funded influenza vaccines is Nova Scotia offering this year?

Nova Scotia is continuing to offer the standard dose influenza vaccine for individuals 6 months of age and older. Flulaval® Tetra and Fluzone® Quadrivalent are licensed for use in those individuals 6 months of age and older and Afluria® Tetra is licensed for use only in those individuals 5 years of age and older. The standard dose influenza vaccine provides protection against two Influenza A viruses and two Influenza B viruses.

Nova Scotia will also be offering the high-dose inactivated quadrivalent influenza vaccine (Fluzone® High-Dose) for residents of long-term care facilities [LTCFs (nursing homes and residential care facilities)] who are 65 years of age and older. Patients in hospital in Nova Scotia who are 65 years of age and older and designated as alternate level of care, awaiting LTCF placement, are also eligible for high-dose inactivated quadrivalent influenza vaccine. This vaccine provides stronger protection against two Influenza A viruses and two Influenza B viruses for this population in comparison to the standard dose inactivated quadrivalent influenza vaccine.

Q: Why is the high-dose quadrivalent influenza vaccine being offered to only residents of LTCFs and those hospitalized patients designated as *alternate level of care*, awaiting LTCF placement and not all individuals 65 years of age and older?

Influenza is a significant cause of death and hospitalization in Nova Scotia, especially for residents of settings like LTCFs. Residents of LTCFs and those designated as ALC in hospital awaiting placement in LTCF are at increased risk of influenza and influenza related complications due to age, compromised health status and congregate living environments. Given these risk factors for residents of LTCFs, the high dose quadrivalent influenza vaccine is offered free to residents of such facilities. All staff and those residents of LTCFs less than 65 years of age should be offered the standard dose quadrivalent influenza vaccine.

Q: Why should I get a flu immunization?

The flu sends thousands of Nova Scotians to doctors, clinics, and emergency departments every year and can cause increased hospitalizations and even death. Reducing the burden of the flu is particularly important this year to minimize an increase in health care use during a potential resurgence of COVID-19. Immunization is the single most effective way to prevent the flu. It helps Nova Scotians avoid getting the flu themselves and avoids spreading it to family, friends, co-workers, and people in their care such as children in child-care facilities and those in health and long-term care facilities.

Q: Where can I get a flu immunization?

Influenza vaccine is available from your primary care provider (family doctor, family practice nurse practitioner) and at pharmacies, some workplaces and in some areas of the province at Public Health clinics.

Q: Why do I need to get an immunization every year?

There are many different strains of flu virus. Each year, the vaccine is changed to protect against the strains of flu virus that are expected that year. This year the vaccine contains:

- 15µg HA - A/Victoria/2570/2019 (H1N1) pdm09-like virus
- 15µg HA - A/Cambodia/e0826360/2020 (H3N2)-like virus
- 15µg HA - B/Phuket/3073/2013-like virus from B/Yamagata lineage
- 15µg HA - B/Washington/02/2019-like virus from B/Victoria lineage

Q: How soon following immunization does protection develop?

Protection from the vaccine generally begins 10 to 14 days after immunization and may last 6 months or longer.

Q: What are the adverse reactions to this vaccine?

The most common adverse reaction is pain at the injection site. Tenderness, redness, and swelling may also be noted at the injection site. Other common reactions after influenza vaccination include fever, headache, and tiredness.

The high-dose influenza vaccine has been associated with higher rates of fever, headaches, sore muscles, and tiredness in comparison to the quadrivalent influenza vaccine. Most of these reactions are mild and resolve within a few days.

Anaphylactic reactions rarely occur.

Q: What are the risks and/or precautions related to this vaccine?

Influenza vaccine should not be given to people who have had an allergic reaction to a previous dose or any component of the vaccine. **Individuals with an egg allergy may receive the influenza vaccine.**

Q: Some people say vaccines don't work, or do more harm than good. So why should Nova Scotians get a flu immunization?

There is a lot of misinformation about vaccinations, and about other ways to avoid the flu. It is important to know that how well the vaccine works each year depends on the age and health of the individual being immunized and the how close the match is between the the influenza vaccine and influenza virus circulating in the community. The health benefits are significant when there is a good match. You often get some protection and are less sick from influenza even when the vaccine is not as well matched to the circulating virus.

The influenza vaccine is a safe, simple, and effective way to protect yourself and from passing the virus on to other people. We recommend it for all Nova Scotians aged 6 months and older.

Q: Can anyone get a flu immunization at a pharmacy?

All individuals 2 years of age and over can have publicly funded influenza vaccine provided by a pharmacy.

Q: Can I just walk into a pharmacy and get a flu immunization?

Each pharmacy will determine how it offers the flu immunization. This year, the delivery of the flu vaccine may look different in providers' settings. Adaptations could include pre-screening for illness/exposure to COVID-19, reducing clinic crowding by using appointments, keeping physical distance whenever possible, requiring hand hygiene, and mask wearing, and using technology to reduce contact (i.e. on-line registration, consent and recording processes).

Q: Can I receive a COVID-19 vaccine at the same time as my flu vaccine?

Yes you can receive influenza vaccine at the same time as your COVID-19 vaccine or anytime before or afterwards. You can also receive Flu Mist (which is not publicly funded) at the same time as your COVID-19 vaccine. If you are due for Pneumococcal vaccine you can receive it at the same time as your influenza vaccine and/or your COVID-19 vaccine.