

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 or worsening of chronic disease.

Q: How is the flu spread?

The flu can spread from person to person through tiny droplets as a result of 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.

The spread of flu is especially common among crowded populations in enclosed spaces such as long-term care facilities and schools. An individual infected with the flu virus will start to show symptoms one to four days after being exposed. These infected individuals are able to spread the virus to others from one day before their symptoms start up to ten days afterwards. It is important to:

- Wash hands often 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.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes.
- Limit touching eyes, nose and mouth.
- Do not share 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 2020-21
- 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. Should a patient in Nova Scotia present with symptoms suggestive of these illnesses, there is a Nova Scotia Respiratory Response Plan that would trigger public health management both at the Department of Health and Wellness (DHW) and the Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA). 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*.

In addition, this year, to reduce the risk of severe illness that could potentially arise from co-infection with COVID-19 and influenza, people at high risk of COVID-19 related illness and those people capable of transmitting influenza to those at high risk of severe illness related to COVID-19 are particularly recommended to receive the influenza vaccine this fall.

**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 (Flulaval® Tetra, Fluzone® Quadrivalent and Afluria® Tetra) for individuals 6 months of age and older. 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 trivalent 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.

For 2020-2021 only, patients in hospital beds in Nova Scotia who are designated as *alternate level of care*, awaiting LTCF placement, and aged 65 years and older will also be eligible for the high-dose inactivated trivalent influenza vaccine. This vaccine provides protection against two Influenza A viruses and one Influenza B virus. It is expected to provide better protection in comparison to the standard dose inactivated quadrivalent influenza vaccine for this age group.

Q: Why is the high-dose trivalent 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 are at increased risk of influenza and influenza related complications due to age, compromised health status and institutional living environment. Given these risk factors for residents of LTCFs, the high-dose trivalent influenza vaccine is offered for 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 utilization 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 or pharmacists), some workplaces and in some areas of the province through clinics offered by Public Health.

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.

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 in a given year will depend on the age and health of the individual being immunized and the match between the influenza virus the vaccine is aimed to protect against and the influenza virus circulating in the community. When the vaccine is not well matched the benefits of the vaccine may vary; however, when there is a good match the benefits of the vaccine are significant.

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

Q: Can anyone get a flu immunization from a pharmacist?

Pharmacists who've been trained have the authority to give the immunization to anyone age 2 or older.

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 washing and mask wearing, and using technology to reduce contact (i.e. on-line registration, consent and recording processes).