

Flu (Influenza) and the Vaccine to Prevent It

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The best way to protect against the flu is by getting the flu vaccine. Doctors recommend that all children 6 months and older get the vaccine every year.

Why should my child get the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine:

- Protects your child from flu, a potentially serious illness
- Prevents your child from spreading flu to others, including babies younger than 6 months who are too young to get the vaccine
- Keeps your child from missing school or childcare (and keeps you from missing work to care for your child)

Is the flu vaccine safe?

Yes. Flu vaccines are safe. Flu vaccines have been used in the United States for more than 50 years. During that time, hundreds of millions of Americans have safely received seasonal flu vaccines. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects, but, most people who get the flu vaccine have no side effects at all.

What are the side effects?

Most children don't have any side effects from the vaccine, but it can cause mild side effects. For example, people vaccinated with the flu shot may feel achy and may have a sore arm where the shot was given. People vaccinated with the nasal spray flu vaccine may have a stuffy nose and sore throat. These side effects are NOT the flu. If experienced at all, these effects are usually mild and last only 1-2 days.

There are two kinds of flu vaccines:

- The shot is usually given in the arm. Children 6 months to 2 years old should get the shot.
- The nasal spray is for children who are 2 years of age or older without medical problems (like asthma) and no history of wheezing.

What is the flu?

The flu—short for influenza—is an illness caused by influenza viruses. Flu viruses infect the nose, throat and lungs. Flu spreads easily and can cause serious problems, especially for very young children, older people, pregnant women, and people with certain long-term medical conditions like asthma and diabetes.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Flu symptoms can include the following:

- Fever (not everyone with the flu has a fever)
- Chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Tiredness
- Vomiting and/or diarrhea (in some children)

Most people who get influenza recover in a few days to less than two weeks. Some people develop complications (such as pneumonia) that can result in hospitalization and even death.



Doctors recommend that your child get the flu vaccine every year starting when he is 6 months old. Some children 6 months through 8 years of age may need 2 doses for best protection.

Is it serious?

The flu can be mild or very serious. We can't be sure who will have a mild case and who will become very sick. We do know that in the United States, each year an average of 20,000 children younger than 5 years old need hospital care because of flu complications. Children with long-term medical conditions and children younger than 5 (and especially younger than 2 years old) are more likely to end up in the hospital from the flu.

Flu seasons vary in how serious they are from one year to another. Since 2004, the total number of flu-associated deaths in children has ranged from 35 to 171 per season. This range doesn't include the 2009 pandemic season, when states reported 348 deaths in children to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some of the more serious complications from the flu include:

- Pneumonia (lung infection)
- Dehydration (loss of body fluids)
- Worsening of long-term medical conditions, like asthma and diabetes

How does the flu spread?

Flu spreads when people who have the flu talk, cough, or sneeze, and droplets of saliva that have the virus in them land in the mouths or noses of people nearby. You may also get the flu by touching an object with flu virus on it—like a doorknob or used tissue—and then touching your own eyes, nose, or mouth. People can spread the flu to others from one day before they have symptoms to 5-7 days after they get sick. This can be longer in children and people who are very sick.

People who have the flu should stay home and away from others (except to go to the doctor) until 24 hours after their fever is gone without the use of fever-reducing medicine.

Can my child get the flu from the flu vaccine?

No, the vaccine does not cause the flu. The flu vaccine protects your child from the flu. However, the vaccine can sometimes cause mild side effects that may be mistaken for the flu. Keep in mind that it will take about 2 weeks after getting his vaccine for your child to build protection against the flu.

Why does my child need a flu vaccine every year?

Flu viruses are constantly changing, so a new vaccine is made each year to protect against the flu viruses that are likely to cause the most illness. Also, protection provided by the vaccine wears off over time. Your child's flu vaccine will protect against the flu all season, but vaccination will be needed again the next flu season.

Where can I learn more about flu vaccine and my child?

To learn more about the flu vaccine, talk to your child's doctor, call 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents.

How can I protect my child against the flu?

- Get your flu vaccine while you are pregnant. This can help protect your baby in the first 6 months of his life, before he can get his own flu vaccine.
- Get your vaccine every year, and ask your baby's caregivers to get vaccinated as well.
- Make sure your child gets his dose(s) of flu vaccine soon after it's available each season.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend all children receive their vaccines according to the recommended schedule.