

Influenza Immunization: Myths vs Facts

Influenza season is here and Public Health wants to ensure that correct information is being shared in regards to the influenza immunization. Injectable vaccinations are provided free of charge through Public Health to Saskatchewan residents. **The provincial publicly-funded influenza program begins Monday October 31, 2016 ending March 31, 2017.** Visit our website at www.sunrisehealthregion.sk.ca for more information on the influenza season. There are common questions and concerns that many have in relation to getting an influenza immunization:

It's just influenza, what's the big deal?

- Influenza is ranked among the top 10 leading causes of death in Canada. It continues to cause deaths among vulnerable people in society. For example, the very young, people over 65 years of age, people with chronic disease(s) and people with weak immune systems are the most vulnerable. Influenza can be a serious disease.
- In Saskatchewan, during the 2015/2016 influenza season, there were 53 severe influenza cases diagnosed and, of those cases, 17 passed away due to influenza. If you have ever had influenza, you know how unpleasant it is.
- Influenza is very contagious and can spread quickly and easily.
- You can be a carrier of influenza and pass it on to others who may be at risk of serious complications; all before you even know you are sick. **Think about the people you look after every day.**
- Influenza is responsible for about 12,200 hospitalizations and 3,500 deaths per year in Canada and can affect everyone, including those who are healthy.
- The Government of Canada describes how easily influenza can be transmitted in a video which can be viewed at http://healthy Canadians.gc.ca/video/flu_tracker-eng.php.

I never get sick so why would I need the vaccine?

- You do not really know when you are going to get sick as it can happen at any time. If you are a healthy person who never gets sick, that does not mean that you cannot transmit the virus to the vulnerable population.
- You can still get an infection without any signs or symptoms and you are capable of passing this virus on to others. You would not be aware that you can be the one infecting your loved ones.
- With an immunization, you protect yourself, your family and those around you during flu season.

I've heard the influenza vaccine gives you influenza. Is this true?

- The influenza vaccine is safe and well-tolerated.
- It cannot cause influenza illness because the inactivated influenza vaccines do not contain any live virus; it is a fragment of the destroyed virus which helps produce antibodies against influenza. The viruses in live attenuated influenza vaccines are weakened so that they cannot cause influenza.
- This year, we do not have publicly funded live vaccine (FluMist nasal spray).
- **It's impossible to get influenza and it's impossible to spread influenza from the injection.**

Why then do some people experience influenza symptoms after they receive the vaccine?

- There are not only influenza viruses that are circulating but also Rhinovirus, Enterovirus, Parainfluenza virus, etc. These viruses are different from influenza but can give you milder signs and symptoms similar to influenza.
- As a general rule, antibody levels (protection) are generally achieved two weeks after immunization.

If I get sick, I'll just go to my doctor for antibiotics. Doesn't medication work?

- Antibiotics only kill bacteria; influenza is caused by a virus.

I got the vaccine last year so why do I need it again?

- Annual vaccination is required because the body's immune response from vaccination diminishes within a year.
 - As influenza viruses change often, the specific strains in the vaccine are reviewed each year and updated as necessary so that there is the greatest probability of matching circulating viruses.
 - This year, Saskatchewan is using only QIV (quadrivalent inactivated influenza vaccine), which means the vaccine covers 4 different types of viral strains (A/H1N1, A/H3N2, B/Brisbane and B/Phuket).
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I am pregnant. Do I still need the vaccine?

- It is even more important that you receive the vaccine. The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) Canada recommends the inclusion of all pregnant women, at any stage of pregnancy, among the specifically recommended recipients of inactivated influenza vaccine due to the risk of influenza-associated morbidity in pregnant women.
 - There is also evidence that vaccination of pregnant women protects their newborns from influenza and influenza-related hospitalization.
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I have an egg allergy. Shouldn't I stay away from the vaccine due to an allergic reaction?

- The NACI has concluded that egg allergic individuals may be given the full dose vaccination without a prior influenza vaccine skin test. The vaccine can be given in any setting where vaccines are routinely administered.
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The vaccine is full of preservatives. Why would I need or want that?

- The vaccine contains the following:
 - **Aluminum and Formaldehyde:** Aluminum is common in food and drinks including fruit and vegetables and even breast milk and infant formula. It's also in antacids, cooking pots, and soda cans. At about six months of age, babies have less aluminum from vaccines than from their diets. Formaldehyde occurs naturally in the human body and helps with metabolism. There is approximately ten times the amount of formaldehyde in a baby's body at any time than there is in a vaccine.
 - **Thimerosal or Mercury:** During the manufacturing process, great care is taken to ensure that vaccines are sterile. Before the routine addition of preservatives, in 1928, during a diphtheria immunization campaign, staphylococcal contamination of a multidose vial led to the septic deaths of 12 of 42 immunized children. Tragic events such as this led to the introduction of preservatives in general, and thimerosal specifically, to prevent microbial infection, thereby enhancing the safety profile of vaccines. Millions of vaccines containing preservatives such as thimerosal have been administered since the 1930s, and there have been no common adverse effects observed.
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Does the influenza vaccine save lives?

- **Yes, it saves lives!** The influenza vaccine has been shown to be effective and immunization has been shown to reduce the number of physician visits, hospitalizations and deaths in high-risk adults. Many studies confirm that the influenza vaccine reduces the risks of pneumonia, hospitalization, and death in elderly persons.
- It is recommended to everyone six months and older but is particularly important for people at high-risk of influenza complications including pregnant women, young children, the elderly, persons with underlying health conditions or compromised immune systems, and caregivers and contacts of people at high risk.

Should you have further questions, please contact Public Health at 306-786-0600 to speak to Dr. Chhetri , Medical Health Officer, or Edith Halyk, Public Health Nursing Supervisor.

Sources: Government of Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada, Saskatchewan Ministry of Health, NACI, Immunize.ca, and other Canadian immunization resources.