

What Parents Need to Know About

The Flu

About the Flu:

Influenza (commonly called “the flu”) is caused by the influenza virus, which infects the respiratory tract (nose, throat, lungs). It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. In the United States, it is estimated that 10 percent to 20 percent of people get the flu each year: an average of 200,000 people are hospitalized for flu-related complications and 36,000 Americans die each year from complications of the flu.

Five hundred out of 100,000 children with high-risk conditions (such as heart disease or asthma) and 100 out of 100,000 otherwise healthy children aged 0 to 4 years who are infected with the flu will be hospitalized for complications each season.

Symptoms of Flu:

Symptoms of flu include fever (usually high), headache, tiredness (can be extreme), dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Other symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, are much more common among children than adults.

Who is at Greatest Risk?

Children at greatest risk for being seriously harmed by flu include those who live in long-term care facilities or have the following medical conditions:

- heart disease;
- lung disease, including asthma;
- kidney disease;
- metabolic disease, including diabetes;
- anemia or other blood disorder;
- weakened immune systems (including HIV infection); and
- condition causing them to receive long-term aspirin therapy (and therefore a higher chance of developing Reye syndrome if infected with the flu).

In addition, healthy children ages 6 to 59 months are also encouraged to get the vaccine because the flu can lead to higher rates of hospitalization.

About the Flu Vaccine:

The flu vaccine prevents the flu, a common and highly contagious infection that can cause serious illness, and even death, in young children, older adults, and certain vulnerable people of all ages. Flu immunization is encouraged because the flu can lead to other problems including pneumonia, inflammation of the heart, and inflammation of the lungs. Healthy children younger than five years of age are more likely than adults to be hospitalized for complications from the flu.

The vaccine protects between 45 percent and 90 percent of healthy children from getting the flu. Studies have shown that the older and healthier children are when they get a flu shot, the more likely they will be protected. Flu vaccination has also been shown to decrease middle ear infections among young children by about 30 percent.

When is the Best Time to Immunize Against the Flu?

The peak season for the flu in the United States is November through April. The ideal time for children to get a flu shot is in October — especially for children under nine years of age who, if they have never had a flu shot before, need a second dose at least one month after their first flu shot, preferably before December.

Vaccine Reactions

The majority of children who receive the vaccine (about 80 percent) will have no side effects. Of those children who have a side effect, most will have only a mild local reaction.

- Mild reactions include soreness or redness where the shot was given.
- Children may have fever, chills, or a general sense of feeling unwell that lasts for one to two days.
- Aspirin-free pain reliever can be used to reduce fever and soreness.

In very rare cases (far less than 1 out of 10,000), vaccinated children can have a serious allergic reaction.

- Children who have an allergy to eggs (which are used in making the vaccine) or any component of the flu vaccine are at greater risk for a serious allergic reaction.

Your child's chance of being harmed by the flu is far greater than the chance of being harmed by the vaccine. Immunizations are one of the most important ways parents can protect their children against serious diseases.

Can My Child Still Get the Flu if He/She Has Been Given the Vaccine?

Yes. Since no vaccine is 100 percent effective, there will always be some immunized people who get the disease. Also, the flu virus changes every year, so there is no way to know exactly which strains of the flu must be in the vaccine to provide complete immunity. The vaccine protects between 45 percent and 90 percent of healthy children from getting the flu, depending on how closely the vaccine strain matches the strain circulating in the community. If a child or adult gets the flu after having received the vaccine, it is usually a much milder case of the disease.

Can My Child Get the Flu from the Flu Shot?

No. The flu vaccine that is licensed and currently available in the United States is made of killed flu viruses and cannot cause infection. Because the flu shot is given in the fall and winter when other common viruses are causing flu-like symptoms, some people will develop illnesses in the weeks after receiving a flu shot. These illnesses are generally not caused by the flu, but rather by an infection from another virus.

What Are Some Good Health Habits to Follow?

The following steps may help prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses like flu:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands to protect you from germs.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

Who Can I Talk to About Getting My Child Vaccinated Against the Flu?

Talk to your pediatrician or physician about getting your child immunized against the flu this year. Parents can also talk to someone in their local health department's immunization program about getting the vaccine as well.

Remember, the best time to immunize against the flu is in the fall, particularly in October or November.

However, it is not too late to get vaccinated in December or later.

Other Resources

- www.immunizenc.com | Immunization Branch, N.C. Department of Health and Human Services
- www.cdc.gov/flu | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Flu Home Page
- www.immunizationinfo.org | National Network for Immunization Information