

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

Q. What is influenza?

A. Influenza is a respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus. It infects the nose, throat, and lungs, and it is spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze, or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. The illness can range in severity from mild to severe and, at times, can even cause death.¹

Q. When is influenza contagious?

A. Influenza is highly contagious in healthy adults and can be spread beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Younger children and those who are immunocompromised can potentially spread it for an even longer time. Thus, it is possible to spread the virus to others before you know you are sick.¹

Q. The flu isn't really that serious, right?

A. Actually, influenza can be quite a serious disease. The virus is unpredictable and changes from season to season. Other variables include the quantity of vaccine available and the level of match between the vaccines to the circulating virus. Furthermore, some people such as pregnant women, children, the elderly, and those with certain health conditions (eg, asthma, diabetes, or heart disease) are at greater risk for developing complications if they get the flu.¹ Influenza causes more than 200,000 hospitalizations from flu-related complications each year and can lead to death in some cases.^{2,3}

Q. What kinds of flu vaccines are available?

A. There are 2 broad categories of influenza vaccine: trivalent and quadrivalent.

Trivalent vaccines help protect against 2 influenza A viruses and an influenza B virus. They are available in the following formats³:

- A standard-dose shot that is manufactured using virus grown in eggs
- An intradermal shot that is injected into the skin instead of the muscle (approved for patients aged 18-49 years)
- A high-dose shot (approved for people aged 65 years and older)
- A shot in which the virus is cultivated in cell (approved for patients aged 18 years and older)
- A recombinant shot that is egg free (approved for patients aged 18 years and older)

The quadrivalent vaccines help protect against 2 influenza A viruses and 2 influenza B viruses and are available as a shot or a nasal spray. The nasal spray is approved for people aged 2 through 49 years.³

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers *(continued)*

Q. Are any of the vaccines recommended over the others?

A. The CDC does not recommend any one vaccine over another. There are many options to choose from—a high-dose, intradermal, and regular shot or a nasal spray. A health care provider can help you decide which vaccine is best for you.³

Q. Can I get the flu from the vaccine?

A. Neither the influenza shot nor the nasal spray can give you the flu. The viruses in the shot are either inactivated and therefore not infectious, or there are no viruses at all (this is called a recombinant vaccine). The viruses in the nasal spray are weakened so that they cannot cause illness. The most common side effects of the shot are soreness, redness, tenderness, or swelling at the injection site. A low-grade fever, headache, and muscle aches can also occur. Side effects of the nasal spray are mild and include runny nose, nasal congestion, and cough.⁴

Q. It's already the end of November. Is it too late to get vaccinated?

A. No, it's not too late. Influenza is unpredictable and the length of the season can vary; it typically peaks in January or February most years and can last until May. As long as the influenza virus is still circulating, it is beneficial to get vaccinated.⁴

Q. I have an egg allergy and I've heard that the flu shot is made with chicken eggs. Is there a vaccine for people with egg allergies?

A. In some cases, depending on the severity of your allergy, you may still be able to get the inactivated influenza vaccine. If you can eat slightly scrambled eggs with no reaction, you can get an inactivated vaccine. If you only get hives after eating eggs or egg-containing foods, you can either get a recombinant influenza vaccine (if the patient is aged 18 years or older and has no other contraindications), which is egg-free, or your physician may recommend monitoring you for at least 30 minutes after administration of the inactivated vaccine (either egg- or cell-culture based) if indicated. Any person who has had a severe allergic reaction to influenza vaccine, regardless of the component, should not receive the vaccine in the future.⁵

REFERENCES: **1.** Key facts about influenza (flu) & flu vaccine. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm>. Updated 2014. Accessed May 15, 2015. **2.** US Department of Health and Human Services. Seasonal influenza (flu): a guide for community & faith-based organizations & leaders. Flu.gov website. http://www.hhs.gov/partnerships/resources/Pubs/seasonal_flu_gd.pdf. Updated 2015. Accessed May 18, 2015. **3.** Key facts about seasonal flu vaccine. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm>. Updated 2015. Accessed May 27, 2015. **4.** Misconceptions about seasonal flu and flu vaccines. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/misconceptions.htm>. Updated 2014. Accessed May 27, 2015. **5.** Influenza vaccination of people with a history of egg allergy. Immunization Action Coalition website. <http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p3094.pdf>. Updated 2015. Accessed May 27, 2015.