



# An Educated Minute

from the Human Resources Department

November 2003

## *Get the Flu Shot!*

Commonly known as "the flu" - its real name is influenza, an infection in the airways caused by the influenza virus. Typically, influenza causes:

- headache
  - sudden high fever (38° to 40° C)
  - loss of appetite
  - chills
  - extreme fatigue and weakness
  - severe muscle aches and pain
  - dry cough
  - sweating
  - runny nose, nasal congestion and sneezing
- And sometimes:**
- sore throat

Symptoms of influenza are quite different than those of a cold. A bout of influenza can leave you bedridden 5 to 10 days. Influenza also lowers the body's ability to fight off other infections, which can lead to pneumonia or bronchitis. It can also worsen a current medical condition such as diabetes, lung disease, heart disease, kidney disease or cancer.

The influenza virus thrives during the winter months when most Canadians are working indoors in close proximity. The influenza virus is highly contagious, spreading rapidly from person to person usually by air-borne droplets carried in a cough or a sneeze.

The virus can also survive up to 48 hours on nonporous surfaces like a telephone, computer keyboard, doorknob, kitchen countertop, coffeepot handle or toys. You may not know you have contacted the influenza virus. It may be a day or even a week before symptoms appear, and in that time you can take the virus home or bring it to work and infect others. That is why frequent hand washing is so important, in addition to vaccination.

**How effective is the vaccine?** As with any vaccine, vaccination may not protect 100% of all susceptible individuals. However, with a good match to circulating strains influenza vaccination has been shown to prevent illness in approximately 70-90% of healthy children and adults. You might still get influenza, but vaccinated people usually find they experience mild symptoms. You might also get another strain of influenza that the vaccine was not designed to protect against.

**Side effects from the vaccine?** Influenza vaccine is very safe, but like any medication, side effects can occur. Most people who get the vaccine have either no side effects or mild effects such as soreness, redness or swelling where the shot was given. Some people may get a fever or muscle aches that start shortly after vaccination and may last 1-2 days. If you experience red eyes, a cough or difficulty breathing within 2-24 hours call your doctor. Severe allergic reactions are extremely rare. If they do occur it is within a few minutes to a few hours after vaccination.

The flu shot is recommended by the *National Advisory Committee on Immunization* for anyone who wants protection from influenza. For medical reasons some people should **not** get a flu shot, otherwise anyone over the age of 6 months can be immunized.

For the following people it is especially important to get a flu shot:

- Anyone with chronic heart or lung disease
- Anyone with diabetes or other metabolic disease, cancer, kidney disease, a blood disorder or a weakened immune system
- Anyone 6 months to 18 years on long-term treatment with acetylsalicylic acid (ASA)
- Anyone, including children, who lives in the same household or is in contact with people at risk such as those mentioned above
- Seniors and anyone who lives, works or volunteers in a nursing home, chronic care facility, retirement home or other healthcare setting
- Emergency service workers including fire, police and ambulance staff



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- Anyone travelling to places where the flu virus is likely circulating

Some people should **NOT** get a flu shot. In general these include:

- people who are allergic to eggs (chicken eggs are used in the production of the vaccine)
- people who are allergic to Thimerosal (a preservative present in contact lens solutions and the flu vaccine)
- people who have had a severe allergic reaction to a previous flu vaccine
- children under 6 months of age, because the vaccine does not work well in this age group

If you have a fever on the day you are supposed to get your flu shot you should wait until the fever has gone.

**It's a fact: Influenza is much worse than a bad cold.**

Commonly know as "the flu" - its real name is influenza, an infection in the airways caused by the influenza virus. Flu is easily caught and easily spread. And although some symptoms may be cold-like, they are far more serious: headache, chills and a dry cough are rapidly joined by body aches and fever. While the fever declines on the second or third day of the illness, full recovery may take up to 6 weeks.

**It's a fact: Influenza can lead to severe complications for thousands each year.**

While most people recover fully, influenza may lead to more severe and life-threatening illnesses, such as pneumonia, resulting in hospitalization and even death. However, vaccination is the only prevention measure that has been proven to reduce mortality rates caused by influenza.

**It's a fact: Immunization is the best prevention.**

It's true! And while a good diet, vitamins and exercise all contribute to your general health, they won't protect you from the influenza virus. Vaccination every fall can. Studies show that immunization is effective in preventing the flu in all segments of the population. Furthermore, it reduces the seriousness of the disease should you contract it.

**It's a fact: Immunization side effects are minor.**

Most commonly, mild soreness at the vaccination site is the only side effect. Less common are headaches and muscle pains. As a precaution, you will be asked to remain at the clinic for 20 minutes following vaccination. If you are allergic to eggs then a flu vaccine may not be for you. Consult your doctor or healthcare professional.

**It's a fact: Flu vaccine can't give you the flu.**

The flu vaccine must meet the very highest standards. In order to offer you the most effective protection, the vaccine must contain part of the virus itself - but the virus is dead and cannot give you the flu.

**It's a fact: New flu strains mean a new vaccine each year.**

Each year the World Health Organization identifies the particular strains of flu the new vaccine must protect against. The vaccine is then produced to be most effective against those strains. Each year, you need to receive the new vaccine to be effectively protected against influenza.

**It's a fact: You should get immunized when the season heats up!**

October to April is flu season. Get immunized in time. Take preventive steps; the best protection is immunization. Remember, your last year's flu vaccination won't protect you this year. There are so many reasons why it makes sense to get immunized - so ask your doctor or healthcare professional about it today.

**It's a fact: Children and youth who are at risk need a flu shot.**

Some children and youth are also at risk of serious complications from influenza. Children who are at risk include those with chronic heart and lung disease such as asthma or cystic fibrosis, as well as children who take acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin) on a daily basis. Certain other serious medical conditions also require annual flu vaccinations. Talk to your paediatrician, family physician, or local health unit about the influenza vaccine.

*Information courtesy of the Canadian Coalition for Influenza Immunization*

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