

## What is the flu?

Influenza, or "flu", is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that can affect millions of people every year. It is highly contagious and occurs mainly in the late fall, winter, or early spring.

Influenza can be spread from person to person. When someone who has influenza sneezes, coughs, or even talks, the influenza virus is released into the air and may be inhaled by anyone nearby.

Influenza affects all age groups and causes moderate to severe illness, loss of school and work, and complications such as pneumonia, hospitalization, and death.

## Why get flu vaccine?

For healthy children and adults, influenza is typically a moderately severe illness.

For people who are 65 and older and those of any age who may have chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, lung disease, or heart problems, influenza can be very severe and even fatal.

Children age 6 months through 4 years are at substantially increased risk for influenza-related hospitalizations and/or emergency room visits.

Bacterial pneumonia is the most common complication of influenza. This complication occurs because the body can be so weakened by influenza that its defenses against bacteria are low. In addition, the sinuses and inner ears may become inflamed and painful.

## Who should get vaccinated?

### Adults Age 50 and older (even if healthy)

The flu vaccine is recommended for all North Dakotans age 65 and older, regardless of their health status.

Individuals 65 and older: Even if you are in excellent health, you have a greater risk of complications if you get the flu. The best way to protect yourself and those around you is to get immunized.

- In individuals 65 and older, the vaccine is 50% to 60% effective in preventing hospitalization and 80% effective in preventing death.
- More than 90% of the deaths in North Dakota related to influenza and/or pneumonia are in adults age 65 and older.
- Influenza and pneumonia are the fifth leading cause of deaths in adults older than 65.

### Children age 6 months through 18 years

Young children are among the most likely to be hospitalized for influenza. Even if your child is in excellent health, protect his or her good health by getting vaccinated!

- Children age 6 months through 4 years are at substantially increased risk for influenza-related hospitalizations and/or emergency room visits.
- The hospitalization rate for children 12 months and younger are comparable to rates among people 65 and older.
- Household contacts and other caregivers of children younger than 6 months also are recommended to receive flu vaccine annually.

Infants younger than 6 months old cannot get flu vaccine, but they can get the flu. This illness can be dangerous for a very young child; therefore, it is important for contacts of these infants to be vaccinated.

Children younger than 9 years old who have never been vaccinated, two doses will be needed their first year. If a child received only one dose in the first year of vaccination, two doses should be received the second year the child is vaccinated.

#### Adults and children with a chronic health condition

Adults and children with chronic (ongoing) health problems, including:

- Asthma or ongoing lung problems
- Kidney disease
- Heart disease
- Diabetes

Those with lower immune systems

- Adults and children with an illness (such as HIV/AIDS or cancer) or who are receiving medical treatment (such as chemotherapy) that can lower the immune system.

Children receiving long-term aspirin therapy

- Children and teenagers between 6 months and 18 years old who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy have a risk of getting Reye Syndrome if they get the flu.

It is important to remember that contacts of high-risk individuals, including health-care workers and family members, also should receive flu vaccine to avoid passing the virus to these high-risk individuals.

#### Health-care workers

Your daily exposure to sick people makes you far more likely to get (and give) the flu. Remember, your patients depend on you to stay healthy so you can help them stay healthy.

This group includes health-care workers and employees in long-term care facilities.

In 2002, only 38% of health-care workers nationwide were vaccinated for flu.

#### Women who will be pregnant during the flu season

Pregnant women also are at risk for serious medical complications from influenza and are recommended to receive flu vaccine.

Pregnant women are four times more likely to be hospitalized than women who are not pregnant.

### Household contacts of the above groups

Household contacts or care-givers of adults and children with chronic health conditions put them at risk for severe illness if they get the flu.

Household contacts and other care-givers of children younger than 6 months

- Infants younger than 6 months old cannot receive flu vaccine, but they can get the flu. This illness can be dangerous for a very young child; therefore, it is important for contacts of these infants to be vaccinated.

Contacts of residents of nursing homes or chronic-care facilities

- Individuals who live in a nursing home or chronic-care facility may be at increased risk for complication of flu due to chronic medical conditions.

### **When should I get vaccinated?**

You can get vaccinated as soon as vaccine is available. The flu season typically peaks after the New Year so you can still get vaccinated in December or later. In North Dakota, the flu season can start in October and last as late as May. **It is never too late to get vaccinated!**

### **Where can I get flu vaccine?**

Check with your doctor, local public health unit or pharmacist.