



Good shot

Vaccinations help protect kids and adults from influenza

Q. I took my four-month-old son in for his routine vaccinations and the nurse said everyone who lives with us should get an influenza vaccination. Why is that?

A. Children under two years of age are at higher risk of hospitalization due to influenza compared to healthy older children or young adults. In fact, in North America, as many as 1,000 out of every 100,000 children under two years of age are admitted to hospital each year because of influenza. If anyone living in your home gets influenza, they can pass it on to your young child. That is why it is so important for anyone living with a child up to 23 months of age, as well as for children six to 23 months of age, to get vaccinated. Vaccine is provided free of charge to these individuals.

There are other high-risk groups that should be vaccinated. Anyone who is 65 years of age and older, is pregnant, or has a weak immune system or chronic illness should have the influenza vaccine. To avoid spreading influenza to these high-risk groups, people living with them should also be vaccinated. All of these groups are eligible for influenza vaccination at no cost.

Q. What is influenza?

A. Influenza is a virus that causes infection in the lungs and airways. It is different from a cold. People who get colds start to feel ill gradually and

have mild symptoms like a runny nose, sneezing and sore throat. When you get sick with influenza the symptoms come on very quickly and are more severe. You can have a high fever, cough, chills, your whole body can ache and you may be very tired. You can also get pneumonia. Although annual vaccination is the best way to prevent influenza every year, you can reduce your chances of getting influenza by washing your hands and practising a healthy lifestyle.

Q. If it is so important for children to be protected, shouldn't everyone be vaccinated?

A. Yes, it is a good idea for everyone to be vaccinated because anyone can get influenza. The cost to our society each year from influenza is huge. The health-care system becomes strained and workplace productivity suffers due to influenza illness absenteeism. Healthy children and adults aged two to 64 years should be vaccinated too, even if they are not in one of the high-risk groups.

Q. I was thinking about getting vaccinated but a friend of mine said she got "the flu" when she got an influenza vaccination.

A. Vaccination cannot cause influenza because the vaccine does not contain live virus. In fact, influenza vaccine helps everyone stay healthier. Large reviews of many studies have shown that influenza vaccination decreases pneumonia,

hospitalization and death in the elderly. Other studies found that influenza vaccination reduces physician visits, hospitalization and death in high-risk people less than 65 years of age, reduces hospitalizations for cardiac disease and stroke in the elderly, and reduces hospitalization and deaths in people with diabetes.

Q. I heard that influenza vaccine has something in it that is not safe for kids.

A. Influenza vaccine is safe and well tolerated in healthy children. The vaccine contains minute quantities of thimerosal, which is used to prevent harmful bacteria from growing in the vaccine vials. Large studies have shown that thimerosal-containing vaccines given to children are not linked to neuro-developmental outcomes such as autistic-spectrum disorders.

Q. Why can't I just take medication if I get sick with influenza?

A. As with many other viral illnesses, there is no cure for influenza. There are medications called antivirals that may be prescribed by a doctor for treatment of influenza. They can help shorten the length of time a person has symptoms of influenza and lessen its severity. Although antivirals can stop or slow down the action of influenza viruses, annual influenza vaccination is the best way to prevent influenza infection and illness.

Q. I've heard that you have to be vaccinated every year. Why is that?

A. Influenza viruses usually change slightly over time. Though small, the changes are often different enough that people who were immune to the ones that appear in the next year. A new vaccine has to be made each year that will help the body's immune system recognize and fight off the changed viruses.

Q. Where can I get vaccinated?

A. Influenza vaccination clinics are being held in Calgary and many nearby towns until March 31, 2008. You can find out where the clinics are by calling Calgary Health Link or visiting the Calgary Health Region website.

Isabel Clark is a telehealth nurse with Calgary Health Link.

FYI

For more information on influenza, please visit:
Calgary Health Region
www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/influenza

To speak to a health professional, contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling **Calgary Health Link.**

Calgary: 403-943-LINK (5465)
Or toll free: 1-866-408-LINK (5465)
Mandarin Health Link: 943-1554
Cantonese Health Link: 943-1556