

The Danger of Flu to Children

The flu, also known as influenza, is more dangerous than the common cold for children and poses a serious threat to the health and well-being of children and their families each year.

- ▶ Children commonly need medical care because of the flu, especially before they turn 5, and each year an average of 20,000 children under the age of 5 are hospitalized because of flu complications.
- ▶ Some children do die from the flu each year, and during the 2013-14 flu season, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) received reports that 107 children had died from flu-related complications.
- ▶ Severe flu complications are most common in children younger than 2, and children with chronic health problems, like asthma and diabetes, are at especially high risk of developing serious flu complications.

Symptoms

- ▶ Symptoms of the flu include fever, headache, tiredness, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches and nausea. Vomiting and diarrhea also can occur and are much more common among children than adults.

Spread of the Flu

The main way that the flu is spread from person to person is through the coughs and sneezes of an infected person. This is because coughs and sneezes cause droplets of fluid to move from the infected person and onto the other people or objects around him or her. A transfer can also occur when a person touches their own nose or mouth after coming into contact with infected droplets, nose drainage or saliva from an infected person. Such contact can occur by touching an infected person directly or by touching an object soiled with these fluids, such as a used facial tissue. Touching the nose or mouth of a third person after such contact can also infect that person. Washing one's hands is the best way to ensure that one does not spread the flu after such contamination. Teaching your child to cover his or her nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing and to wash his or her hands immediately after coming into contact with any infected fluids, including their own, will help them keep both themselves and others safe from infection.

Newly infected adults and caregivers are able to spread the flu as early as one day before showing symptoms. They will continue to be contagious up to seven days after the symptoms have begun. This period can be longer in children and in people who don't fight disease as well, such as older persons or those with an otherwise weakened immune system.

If your child develops a fever (100°F or higher under the arm, 101°F or higher orally, or 102°F or higher rectally), chills, cough, sore throat, headaches or muscles aches, keep your child at home until their temperature has been normal for 24 hours without the need for fever-reducing medicine. Remind your child to cover their mouth when coughing or sneezing to protect others. You may also want to send facial tissues and alcohol-based wipes or gels with your child for use at school.

Should my Child Go to School or Day Care if Other Children Are Sick?

It is not unusual for some children in schools or day cares to get sick during the winter months. If many children get sick at your child's school or day care, it is up to you to decide whether or not to keep him or her home at that time. You may want to check with your doctor for specific guidance, especially if your child has other health problems.

Types of Flu Vaccine

There are two types of seasonal flu vaccine:

- ▶ an inactivated (dead) vaccine, or the "flu shot," that is given by injection into the muscles; and
- ▶ a live, attenuated (weakened) flu vaccine that is sprayed into the nostrils.

Vaccination Recommendations

Vaccination is the best method for preventing the flu and its potentially severe complications in children.

The CDC is now recommending that everyone 6 months of age and older get a yearly flu vaccination.

The CDC strongly recommends that the following people in contact with certain groups of children get a flu vaccine in order to protect the children in their lives from the flu:

- ▶ close contacts of children younger than 5 (people who live with them),

- ▶ out-of-home caregivers (nannies, day care providers, etc.) of children younger than 5,
- ▶ people who live with or have other close contact with a child of any age with a chronic health problem (asthma, diabetes, etc.), and
- ▶ all health care workers.

For information about other people recommended for vaccination, either because they are at high risk for serious, flu-related complications or because they are contacts of high-risk people, please visit www.cdc.gov/flu.

Children at Greatest Risk of Flu Complications

The groups of children listed below are at increased risk for flu complications.

1. Children Younger Than 6 Months Old

The flu vaccine is not approved for use in infants younger than 6 months. However, the risk of flu complications is higher in these young infants than it is for children in other age group. The best way to protect children younger than 6 months is to make sure their families and caregivers are vaccinated.

2. Children Between the Ages of 6 Months and 5 Years

More than 20,000 U.S. children younger than 5 are hospitalized due to the flu each year. Even children in this age group who are otherwise healthy are at risk simply because their immune system is not yet fully developed. In addition, otherwise healthy children between the ages of 2 and 5 are more likely to be taken to a doctor, an urgent care center, or the emergency room because of the flu than older children are. To protect their health, all children aged 6 months or older should be vaccinated against the flu each year. Vaccinating their families and caregivers can also help protect them from getting sick.

3. Children 6 Months and Older with Chronic Health Problems

Children with a chronic health problem, such as asthma or other problems of the lungs; immune suppression; chronic kidney disease; heart disease; HIV/AIDS; diabetes; sickle-cell anemia; long-term aspirin therapy; or any condition that can reduce lung function, such as cognitive dysfunction, spinal cord injuries, seizure disorders, or other neuromuscular disorders, are at particular risk of flu complications and should be vaccinated as early as possible. Their families and caregivers should also be vaccinated to help protect these particularly vulnerable children.

When to Get Children Vaccinated

Yearly flu vaccination should begin as soon as vaccine is available, ideally in October, but vaccinations are available throughout the flu season, which usually peaks in January.

Because flu viruses change every year, the vaccine is updated annually. So even if you or your children got a flu vaccine last year, you and your children both still need to get a flu vaccine this season to be protected. If October and November slip by and you haven't gotten your vaccinations, get vaccinated in December or later.

Special Instructions for Children Being Vaccinated Against Flu for the First Time:

It is especially important for children of 6 months to 9 years of age who are getting a flu vaccine for the first time to receive the vaccine as early as possible. This is because these children will need the two doses of vaccine to be spread apart by a minimum of 28 days. If possible, the first dose should be given as soon as vaccine becomes available around October. The second dose should be given soon after the 28-day period has passed. The first dose "primes" the immune system, but it is the second dose that provides immune protection. Children receiving the vaccine for the first time that only get one dose can have reduced or even no protection from the flu. Please note that it usually takes about two weeks after the second dose for protection against the flu to begin, so be sure to schedule the second dose as early as you can after the 28-day period.

Is There Medicine to Treat the Flu?

There are antiviral drugs for children aged 1 year and older that can reduce flu symptoms and help a child get better more quickly, but these drugs need to be approved by a doctor. They should also be started during the first two days that a child is sick for them to work best. Your doctor can discuss with you if these drugs are right for your child.

Where Can I Get My Child Vaccinated?

Many private doctors and parish health units provide immunizations. Call your health care provider or parish health unit to make a vaccination appointment. You can also check the Shots for Tots website for immunization outreach efforts in your area at www.shotsfortots.com.