

Preventing the spread of influenza

A patient and visitor guide

You can help prevent the spread of influenza by ensuring that you and your family receive the influenza vaccine yearly. Hand washing is another important measure in preventing the spread of viruses.

Q. What is Influenza?

A. Influenza (the flu) is a viral disease of the respiratory tract that can cause mild to severe illness. Symptoms include fever, chills, cough (usually dry), headache, muscle pain, runny eyes, nasal congestion, sore throat, extreme weakness and fatigue. Cough is severe and may last two or more weeks; most other symptoms resolved in five to seven days.

Q. How is Influenza spread?

A. Influenza is spread by respiratory droplets and contact with secretions. Droplet spread occurs when someone with influenza coughs or sneezes into another person's eyes, nose or mouth. Influenza is spread in the environment when people cough or sneeze onto surfaces, or touch surfaces with contaminated hands. The virus can be spread to others before symptoms develop.

Q. What are my requirements as a St. Joseph's visitor/patient during influenza season?

A. If you are sick or feeling unwell with symptoms of a respiratory illness and your appointment /visit can be put off, you should not come to the hospital.

Q. Can the influenza vaccination give me the flu?

A. The influenza vaccine will not give you the flu as it does not contain a live virus. At the time of year the flu vaccine is given, many viruses are circulating and illnesses caused by these other viruses can be mistaken for the development of influenza.

Q. Is the influenza vaccine safe?

A. The influenza vaccine has been administered to the public for greater than 50 years, and is safe for most people. Check with your primary care physician for more information.

Q. Are there side effects to the flu vaccine?

A. The viruses in the flu shot are killed (inactivated), so you cannot get the flu from a flu shot. Some minor side effects that may occur are:

1. Soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot was given
2. Fever (low grade)
3. Aches

What are the benefits of the flu vaccine?

1. Flu vaccination can keep you from getting sick from the flu.
2. Flu vaccination can reduce the risk of flu-associated hospitalization, including among children and older adults. Older people with weaker immune systems often have a lower protective immune response after flu vaccination compared to younger, healthier people. This can result in lower vaccine effectiveness in these people.
3. Flu vaccination is an important preventive tool for people with chronic health conditions.
4. Vaccination was associated with lower rates of some cardiac events among people with heart disease, especially among those who had had a cardiac event in the past year.
5. Flu vaccination also has been shown to be associated with reduced hospitalizations among people with diabetes and chronic lung disease
6. Vaccination helps protect women during and after pregnancy. Getting vaccinated can also protect a baby after birth from flu. (Mom passes antibodies onto the developing baby during her pregnancy.)
7. Flu vaccination also may make your illness milder if you do get sick.
8. Getting vaccinated yourself also protects people around you, including those who are more vulnerable to serious flu illness, like babies and young children, older people, and people with certain chronic health conditions.

Q. Do I need to get the flu shot every year?

A. Yes. Flu viruses change from year to year, which means three things:

1. The vaccine made to protect you from the circulating flu virus strains one year may not protect against the virus strains circulating the next year, which is why the flu vaccine is updated yearly.
2. You can get the flu more than once during your lifetime.
3. Protection (immunity) from the previous year's flu vaccine may wane over 6 to 12 months and no longer be effective the next year.

Q. When is the best time to get the flu shot and how long does it last?

A. The best time to get your influenza vaccine is early, between October and December, before the number of influenza cases increase in Canada. Full protection against influenza takes about two weeks from the time you get the shot and can last up to 12 months.

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