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INFLUENZA VACCINATION – FAQ's

Q: WHAT IS INFLUENZA (FLU)?

Influenza is a contagious disease caused by a virus. Influenza viruses infect many parts of the body, including the lungs. When someone who has influenza sneezes, coughs, or even talks, the influenza virus is expelled into the air and may be inhaled by anyone close by.

Q: WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF INFLUENZA?

Influenza is a highly contagious respiratory viral illness. Influenza A and B are the major types of influenza viruses that cause human disease and affect people of all ages. Persons with influenza may have fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue, muscle aches, headaches, runny nose, and watery eyes. Children may experience vomiting and diarrhea in addition to these symptoms. Although the fever and body aches usually last for 3-5 days, a cough and fatigue may persist for 2 weeks or more.

Q: WHO GETS INFLUENZA?

Anyone can get influenza especially when it is widespread in the community. People who have pre-existing chronic diseases, especially heart or lungs, as well as the elderly or very young are particularly susceptible to the complications associated with influenza infection.

Q: HOW LONG IS A PERSON WITH INFLUENZA CONTAGIOUS?

The period between infection and onset of symptoms (incubation period) for influenza is 1-4 days. A person with influenza may be contagious 1 day before symptoms appear and 3-7 days after the onset of symptoms. Children may be contagious for longer than 7 days.

Q: HOW DOES THE FLU SPREAD?

The main way that influenza viruses are spread is from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. (This is called "droplet spread.") This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled (generally up to 3 feet) through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby. The viruses also can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

Q: HOW CAN INFLUENZA AND ITS COMPLICATIONS BE PREVENTED?

Influenza vaccine is made each year so the vaccine contains influenza strains that are expected to cause illness that year.

Influenza can be prevented with a high degree of success when a person receives the current influenza vaccine and that vaccine matches the prevalent virus strain that year.

Q: IF I GOT THE VACCINE LAST YEAR, WILL I BE IMMUNE THIS YEAR?

It's important to remember that there are different types of influenza viruses circulating and different variants within virus types. The same type of flu virus does not necessarily circulate each year. For instance, during the 2003-04 flu season, influenza A (H3N2) viruses predominated; however, infection with an influenza A (H3N2) virus would not provide protection against influenza B or influenza A viruses.

In general, a person who is infected with an influenza virus one year will have some immunity to closely related viruses that may persist for one or more years. For example, if someone was infected with the Fujian strain of H3N2 that predominated last season, they are likely to have some natural immunity that will give them protection if they are exposed to that strain or a closely related strain again this season.



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The degree of protection depends on the health of the person involved. Young and healthy people with normal immune systems will likely have good immunity against the same or related strains of virus from one year to the next. However, people with chronic health problems or weakened immune systems are less likely to have immunity from year to year.

Q: WHICH STRAINS HAVE BEEN INCLUDED IN THIS YEARS VACCINE?

The Australian vaccine for the year 2010 contains:

- A (H1N1): an A/California/7/2009 (H1N1) - like strain,
- A (H3N2): an A/Perth/16/2009 (H3N2) - like strain,
- B: a B/Brisbane/60/2008 - like strain.

Q: IS THE INFLUENZA VACCINE SAFE?

The vaccine does not cause influenza. It does not contain "live virus". Generally, people have no reaction to the vaccine. Some people may experience mild side effects such as tenderness and redness at the injection site. This usually clears within a day. Persons with allergies to eggs or chicken products should not receive influenza vaccine, as it is prepared from influenza viruses grown in eggs. Apart from allergic reactions some individuals may develop rare neurological conditions associated with weakness that is self limiting. This usually resolves quickly.

Q: IS THE INFLUENZA VACCINE SAFE FOR PREGNANT WOMEN?

Influenza vaccine is safe and indeed recommended for pregnant women however, we recommend you visit your GP to receive the flu vaccination if you are pregnant.

Q: HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE INFLUENZA VACCINE?

In years in which there is a good match between the vaccine virus and the virus strain causing illness, influenza vaccine is generally considered to be 70% - 90% effective in preventing influenza illness in healthy adults. It is important to know that it takes about 2 weeks after influenza vaccination for a person to develop protection against influenza infection. Also, influenza vaccine does not protect against respiratory illness caused by other viruses.

Q: WHAT OTHER STEPS CAN I TAKE TO PREVENT FLU?

There are other good health habits that can help prevent the flu. These are:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.
- If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick.
- You will help prevent others from catching your illness.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
- Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

Q: CAN YOU GET INFLUENZA FROM A VACCINATION?

No, it is absolutely impossible to get influenza from a vaccine. The viruses in the vaccine are inactivated and incapable of causing influenza. Instead, the person is protected from influenza by antibodies that are formed by the immune system response to the vaccine. Generally, it takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection against influenza virus infection. In the meantime you are still at risk of catching the flu.

Q: WHEN IS THE INFLUENZA SEASON IN AUSTRALIA?

The peak of the flu season varies and usually occurs at some point between June and October. It can last many months. In the last few years, the flu season has occurred in August and September. It is usually recommended that influenza vaccinations commence in April, May and June (for the general public).