

Health Care Professionals' Guide for Speaking with Parents

Here are some of the most common questions that parents may have about influenza vaccination along with proposed responses you can use when discussing vaccination with parents and others.

■ **What exactly is influenza? Is it really that serious?**

Yes! Influenza, also called the flu, is a contagious viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs that is easily spread from person to person. It can lead to serious complications in children, including hospitalization and death. When someone who has influenza sneezes, coughs, or even talks, the influenza virus passes into the air and may be breathed in by anyone close by.

Influenza and its complications claim an average of 36,000 lives and hospitalize more than 200,000 in the United States every year. Each year influenza causes approximately 20,000 hospitalizations and nearly 100 deaths in American children younger than 5 years of age.

■ **How would I know if my child has influenza?**

Influenza comes on very suddenly. The symptoms usually include high fever, aches, chills, headache, cough, sore throat and a stuffy or blocked nose. Children, especially infants and toddlers, may have additional symptoms that adults usually don't experience, including ear aches, nausea and vomiting.

■ **Why does my child need to get an influenza vaccination?**

An annual influenza vaccination is the best way to protect your child against influenza. Many health organizations recommend annual influenza vaccination in order to reduce the risk of becoming infected with the virus.

Anyone wishing to reduce his or her risk for influenza should ask a health care professional about receiving an annual vaccination. Specifically, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends annual influenza vaccination for the following groups:

- All persons, including school-aged children, who want to reduce their risk of becoming ill with influenza or of transmitting influenza to others
- All children from 6 months up to 5 years of age
- Anyone 6 months of age and older with certain chronic medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, asthma, heart disease, compromised immune system)
- Children 6 months up to 18 years of age receiving long-term aspirin therapy

- Pregnant women
- People who live with, care for or come into close contact with persons at risk, including children younger than 6 months of age and individuals with chronic medical conditions or compromised immunity
- People 50 years of age and older
- Health care professionals
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities

■ **How effective is the influenza vaccine? Do vaccines always work?**

The influenza vaccine has been reported to be between 70 percent and 90 percent effective in healthy young people in preventing influenza and reducing the severity of the virus. It is the best way to protect against influenza.

■ **My child was vaccinated last year, so why does he/she need to get vaccinated again this year?**

The circulating influenza viruses usually change from year to year. Each year's influenza vaccine is designed to protect against the virus strains that will be circulating that season. Annual vaccination is the best way to protect against influenza.

■ **Is the injectable influenza vaccine safe for a child who has a chronic medical condition?**

The injectable influenza vaccine is safe for all infants and children 6 months of age and older and has very few side effects. In addition, vaccination is especially beneficial for individuals with compromised immune systems or certain underlying medical conditions (asthma, diabetes, heart disease), because influenza can worsen chronic medical conditions or cause serious complications in people with chronic illnesses. For example, medical professionals believe that many asthma flare-ups are brought on by influenza.

■ **Is vaccination against influenza safe for everyone?**

Individuals who have had a severe reaction to eggs or egg proteins or a previous influenza vaccine-associated allergic reaction should avoid immunization. People with high fever should usually wait until their symptoms ease up. However, the vaccine can be given during minor illnesses, with or without fever.

Certain groups should not receive the nasal vaccine, including persons younger than 2 years of age, those 50 years and older, children or adolescents taking aspirin, pregnant women and individuals with certain underlying medical conditions, such as asthma or diabetes.

For most people, the benefits of vaccines far outweigh the potential risks.

■ **Can the influenza vaccine actually cause influenza? Are there any side effects?**

Influenza vaccination does not cause influenza.

The most frequent side effect of the injectable influenza vaccine is soreness at the

injection site for one to two days. Occasionally, some people experience a period of mild fever and fatigue for a day or two following vaccination.

Side effects from the nasal influenza vaccine are generally mild and temporary. The most common side effect is runny nose. Other side effects include cold-like symptoms, such as headache, cough, sore throat, tiredness or weakness, irritability and muscle aches.

■ **Why do I need to have my child immunized now?**

The best time for people to receive influenza vaccination is before they are exposed to the virus. Getting vaccinated now gives your child's body time to build protection against the strains of influenza predicted to be most common this influenza season.

■ **Is it true that the influenza vaccine can cause autism or other diseases?**

Many studies, both in and outside of the United States, have not shown any link between vaccines and autism or an increased risk of diabetes, arthritis or other diseases.

■ **Aren't infants too young to be vaccinated against influenza? Are they able to handle so many vaccines in a short period?**

Beginning at 6 months of age, it is very important for infants to be vaccinated, because babies are extremely vulnerable to severe complications – even death – from influenza.

Babies manage a huge number of challenges to their immune systems from birth on. Their bodies have billions of immune cells that keep bacteria in check. Vaccines in general are just a small part of the challenges babies encounter, and they provide essential protection against more than a dozen diseases to help babies get through the most vulnerable period of their lives and to keep them safe in the future.

■ **How many vaccinations are necessary to be protected?**

One vaccination a year is all that is needed to protect against influenza, except for children younger than 9 years of age who are receiving influenza vaccination for the first time. These children require two injectable vaccine doses at least one month apart and at least six weeks apart for the nasal vaccine, to ensure the highest amount of protection.