



Virgin Islands Department of Health

FACT SHEET *Influenza*

What is influenza (also called flu)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu **vaccine** each year.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:

Fever or feeling feverish/chills; Cough; Sore throat; Runny or stuffy nose; Muscle or body aches; Headaches; Fatigue (very tired). Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults. It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.

How flu spreads

Flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. Less often, a person might also get the flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or possibly their nose.

What is the period in which the flu is contagious?

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day **before** symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days **after** becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time.

How serious is the flu?

Flu is unpredictable and how severe it is can vary widely from one season to the next depending on many things, including: what flu viruses are spreading; vaccine availability; how many people get vaccinated, and how well the flu vaccine is matched to flu viruses that are causing illness.

Certain people are at greater risk for serious complications if they get the flu. This includes older people, young children, pregnant women and people with health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease, and persons who live in facilities like nursing homes.

Flu seasons are unpredictable and can be severe. Over a period of 30 years, between 1976 and 2006, estimates of flu-associated deaths in the United States range from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000 people.

Complications of flu

Complications of flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

How do I prevent the flu?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each season. There are two types of flu vaccines:

- “Flu shots” — inactivated vaccines (containing killed virus) that are given with a needle.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine — a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that is given as a nasal spray (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”). The viruses in the nasal spray vaccine do not cause the flu. LAIV is approved for use in healthy* people 2 to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

When should I get vaccinated against the flu?

Yearly flu vaccination should begin in September, or as soon as vaccine is available, and continue throughout the flu season which can last as late as May. This is because the timing and duration of flu seasons vary. While flu season can begin early as October, most of the time seasonal flu activity peaks in January, February or later.

Who should get vaccinated?

Everyone 6 months and older should get a flu vaccine each year. While everyone should get a flu vaccine each flu season, it’s especially important that certain people get vaccinated either because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for people at high risk for developing flu-related complications.

Who is at high risk for developing flu-related complications?

- Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old
- Adults 65 years of age and older
- Pregnant women
- People who have medical conditions including:
 - asthma (even if it’s controlled or mild)
 - Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions [including disorders of the brain, spinal cord, peripheral nerve, and muscle such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy (seizure disorders), stroke, intellectual disability (mental retardation), moderate to severe developmental delay, muscular dystrophy, or spinal cord injury]
 - Chronic lung disease such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cystic fibrosis
 - Heart Disease
 - Blood disorders such as sickle cell disease
 - Endocrine disorders such as diabetes
 - Kidney disorders
 - Liver disorders
 - Metabolic disorders (such as inherited metabolic disorders and mitochondrial disorders)
 - Weakened immune system due to disease or medication such as people with HIV/AIDS, or cancer, or those on chronic steroids.
 - People younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy

- People who are morbidly obese (Body Mass Index [BMI] of 40 or greater)

Who else should get vaccinated?

Other people for whom vaccination is especially important are:

- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:
 - Health care workers
 - Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
 - Household contacts and caregivers of children younger than 5 years of age with particular emphasis on vaccinating contacts of children younger than 6 months of age (children younger than 6 months are at highest risk of flu-related complications but are too young to get vaccinated)

Who should not be vaccinated against the flu?

Some people should not be vaccinated without first consulting a physician. They include:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past.
- Children younger than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for use in this age group).
- People who are moderately or severely ill with or without fever should usually wait until they recover before getting flu vaccine. If you are ill, talk to your doctor about whether to reschedule the vaccination. People with a mild illness can usually get the vaccine.

*Adapted from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
For more information visit www.healthvi.org and click on the CDC (www.cdc.gov) link.*