



Flu (Influenza)

Information for parents and caregivers of children and youth with special health care needs

Flu (Influenza) is a highly contagious disease and can be serious, especially for high-risk groups such as children with special health care needs. The flu infects the nose, throat, and lungs and is different from a cold. It usually comes on suddenly and may cause fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches, and tiredness.

Chronic health conditions may include:

- Disorders of the brain and spinal cord
- Cerebral palsy
- Epilepsy (seizure disorders)
- Stroke
- Intellectual disability
- Moderate to severe developmental delay
- Muscular dystrophy
- Spinal cord injury
- Endocrine disorders, like diabetes
- Kidney disorders
- Metabolic disorders
- Genetic disorders such as Down's syndrome
- Immune disorders
- Cancers like leukemia
- Chronic lung diseases such as cystic fibrosis

Is my child at risk? The flu can be very dangerous for children, especially children with neurologic conditions and other chronic health issues. They are more likely to become very sick if they get the flu. Children and youth with special health care needs are at greater risk of severe flu illness and complications like pneumonia, croup, bronchiolitis, bronchitis, sinus and ear infections, and even death.

Even healthy children need the flu vaccine each year. It is important that children, as well as those in their household, are vaccinated to prevent infection. Each year about 20,000 children younger than five years old are hospitalized from flu complications.

What can I do? Getting a yearly flu vaccine is the best protection against flu and its complications. Caregivers and family members should get a flu vaccine. By getting vaccinated, you will be less likely to get the flu and also less likely to spread the flu to the child. Yearly flu vaccination is recommended for everyone age six months and older.

How safe and effective is flu vaccine? The flu vaccine has an excellent safety record. The vaccine is tested and closely monitored each year. Like any medication, vaccines may have side effects, which are usually mild, including possible reactions at the injection site. If you or your child get vaccinated and still get the flu, you'll likely have a milder or shorter illness.

What should I know about flu vaccines for my child?

Some children under nine years old may need two doses of flu vaccine in the same season. Talk with your provider about what the right schedule is for your child.

How can my family prevent and treat the flu? People of any age who are at high-risk for developing complications from flu should call their doctor or get medical attention right away if they have flu symptoms. Antiviral drugs can help, but must be prescribed by a doctor and started as soon as possible.



Where do I find flu vaccine?

- Call your doctor.
- Visit your local pharmacy.
- Check the online [Flu Vaccine Finder](#).
- Contact your local health department.
- Call the **Family Health Hotline: 1-800-322-2588**.



For persons with disabilities this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 1-800-525-0127 (TDD/TTY 711).

Other tips for protecting your family against the flu:

- Health:** Make sure that your child's chronic health condition is under the best medical control possible.
- Distance:** You and your child should avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Good health manners:** Cover your cough, wash your hands, and stay home when you're sick.

Who should know if my child gets a flu shot? Please keep your child's primary care providers informed of all vaccines. Vaccinations are an important part of your child's medical record.

More resources:

- **Flu News**
(Department of Health):
www.KnockOutFlu.org
- **Children, the Flu, and the Flu Vaccine**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/children.htm
- **Flu and Children with Neurologic Conditions**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/neurologic-pediatric.htm
- **Children and Antiviral Drugs**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
www.cdc.gov/flu/children/antiviral.htm
- **People at High Risk of Developing Flu-Related Complications**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/high_risk.htm
- **The Flu: A Guide for Parents**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/freeresources/updated/fluguideforparents_trifold.pdf
- **Flu Vaccine Effectiveness – How Well Does the Flu Vaccine Work?**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/vaccineeffect.htm
- **Thimerosal and Seasonal Flu Vaccines**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/vaccine/thimerosal.htm
- **Vaccination: Who Should Do It, Who Should Not and Who Should Take Precautions**
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention):
www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/whoshouldvax.htm#nasal-spray