

Influenza

Influenza (or “the flu”) is a respiratory illness caused by a virus. Some people who get influenza can become very ill and need hospital care. Influenza leads to thousands of deaths each year, mostly among the elderly. Young children and those with chronic health conditions are also at risk. In Canada, the influenza season usually runs from November to April. Influenza can have serious consequences during and after pregnancy for you and your baby.

Common symptoms of influenza include:

- cough
- fever
- sore throat
- chills
- headache
- runny nose
- fatigue
- muscle aches
- loss of appetite
- sneezing
- watery eyes

Influenza rarely causes diarrhea or throwing up. It is not the same as what’s often referred to as “stomach flu.”

The influenza vaccine (flu shot)

The influenza vaccine is updated annually because influenza strains can change every year.

It takes about two weeks for the influenza vaccine to start working. The influenza vaccine works by boosting your immune system to make it better at fighting influenza - and keeping you healthy.

Some people who get the influenza vaccine may still get sick with influenza, but it will usually be a milder case than if they did not get the influenza vaccine.

Pregnancy and the influenza vaccine

The influenza vaccine is safe for pregnant women at all stages of pregnancy, and for breastfeeding mothers.

Since babies under 6 months of age are too young to receive the influenza vaccine, getting the vaccine during pregnancy is the best way to protect your baby. Women in the third trimester of pregnancy, and those who may deliver their baby during influenza season, are especially encouraged to get the influenza vaccine. Antibody protection is transferred from mother to baby during pregnancy and through breast milk once the baby is born.

Pregnant women are more likely to be hospitalized when they have influenza than non-pregnant women of the same age.

It is especially important that pregnant women with high-risk conditions, such as diabetes, immune suppression, heart or lung diseases, get the influenza vaccine to protect themselves and the baby.

What if I get sick with influenza when I am pregnant?

In most cases, an unborn baby won’t be hurt if the mother gets influenza. But because influenza can lead to other health problems, there is a chance these complications could lead to a miscarriage or preterm labour. The influenza vaccine will help to stop this.

The influenza virus does not pass through breast milk, but being in close contact with your newborn infant could spread the virus. Getting an influenza vaccine, washing your hands, and breastfeeding all give your new baby the best protection against influenza.

What are the risks from the influenza vaccine?

The most common side effects are soreness, redness, or swelling where the vaccination was given, which may last a couple of days. You might also notice fever, fatigue, and muscle aches within six to 12 hours after your vaccination, and these effects may last a day or two. A vaccine, like any medicine, can rarely cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions, within a few minutes to a few hours after the vaccination. The risk of the influenza vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small.

How can I learn more?

- Speak with your pharmacist
- Contact your family doctor, nurse practitioner, obstetrician or midwife
- Visit www.hpph.ca

