
THE FLU

Consumer Fact Sheet

October 2006

Residents and family members should protect themselves and their families from getting the flu every year. That means understanding what the flu is, how it is spread, why it is dangerous, planning to get vaccinated, and educating long-term care facilities on their responsibilities and available resources. Getting a flu vaccination each fall is an important and easy way to prevent getting the flu as well as flu-related death and severe illness.

The Flu

The flu can include a sudden onset of fever, bodily aches and pains, chills, sore throat/dry cough, nausea, and feeling poorly all over.

Flu Dangers

The flu can be fatal in elderly people, people with chronic diseases, and anyone with a weak immune system. In cases where the flu is not fatal, older adults in particular, may feel weak for a long time even after other symptoms go away.

Each year:

- 5-20% of the US population gets the flu, on average;
- More than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications;
- About 36,000 people die from the flu - most are 65 or older.

What the Flu Does

The flu virus is similar to a cold, in that it attacks the nose, throat, and lungs. It can sometimes cause problems like pneumonia, ear and sinus problems, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions (such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.)

How the Flu Spreads

The flu is highly contagious, and easily passed from person to person by coughing and sneezing. The virus usually spreads in respiratory droplets. However, sometimes people become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose. People can infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 days after becoming sick. That means, you can pass the flu on to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

About Getting a Flu Shot

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), you can NOT get the flu from the flu shot. The CDC explains that the shot is “given with a needle, and the ingredients in the vaccine cannot cause the flu because the flu viruses in the vaccine are killed. About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. The flu shot helps your body fight the viruses that cause the flu. It does this by teaching your immune system to recognize flu viruses, so that it is ‘primed’ or ready, to fight the disease if you are exposed to it. The most common side effects are soreness or redness where the shot was given. These symptoms go away in a few days. Other side effects such as fever or aches are extremely rare. The risk of severe allergic reaction is less than 1 in 4 million. Getting the vaccine is your best protection against this disease.”

- More people die from flu than from any other vaccine-preventable disease. Getting a flu vaccination yourself can help protect your family members, including older adults.
- In long-term care facilities vaccination is the primary method to prevent influenza, limit transmission, and prevent complications from influenza.
- For the elderly, a flu shot can reduce serious complications from influenza and reduce the number of people who die or need a hospital stay because of the flu.
- The best time to get vaccinated is October or November. Flu season can begin as early as October, and last as late as May.

Who Should Get Vaccinated

As the primary guard against an outbreak, the CDC recommends that residents and workers of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities get vaccinated.

The following list includes specific groups of people that are at especially high risk for serious flu complications, and therefore should receive a vaccination.

- Adults over 65 years old;
- People with close contact to older adults;
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities;
- People with heart or lung disease (including asthma, diabetes, kidney or blood problems, HIV/AIDS, cancer) or any condition that makes it harder to fight off disease;
- All Health Care workers

Important Facts

- You cannot get the flu from a flu shot because the viruses contained in the "Flu Shot" are inactive.
- Neither vitamin C nor Echinacea has been conclusively proven effective against the flu.
- Regular hand washing is still the most simple and effective way to reduce transmission of the flu.
- Cold weather doesn't cause the flu; the virus is simply more prevalent during winter months.
- Antibiotics are not effective against influenza, BUT antiviral medications (used within 48 hours of symptom onset) are effective and available from a physician if you come down with the flu.
- If you feel sick, drink fluids and eat sensibly.
- You should also get vaccinated against pneumococcal disease, a common secondary complication of the flu which can result in death or hospitalization.

What Medicare Covers

Influenza "Flu" shots ARE covered by Medicare and other health insurance programs. Both the costs of the vaccine and its administration (by recognized providers) are covered by Medicare. There is no coinsurance or co-payment applied to this benefit,

and a beneficiary does not have to meet his or her deductible to receive this benefit.

Facilities' Responsibilities

Long-term care facilities should take special prevention and control measures. Some strategies for the prevention and control of influenza in long-term care facilities include:

- Annual influenza vaccination of all residents and health-care personnel;
- Implementation of Standard and Droplet Precautions when a person is suspected or confirmed to have influenza;
- Active surveillance and influenza testing for new illness cases;
- Restriction of ill visitors and personnel;
- Administration of prophylactic antiviral medications;
- Other prevention strategies, such as respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette programs.

Resources for You and the Facility

For more information, resources, flyers, checklists, instructions, and details on flu prevention:

- Centers for Disease Control: 1-800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636) or www.cdc.gov/flu
- <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/infectioncontrol/longtermcare.htm>
- The 2005-2006 Immunizers' Question & Answer Guide to Medicare Coverage of Influenza and Pneumococcal Vaccinations: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/flugallery/index.htm>
- The American Lung Association: 1-800-LUNG-USA (1-800-586-4872) or <http://www.lungusa.org/site/pp.asp?c=dvLUK9O0E&b=35426>
- Immunization Action Coalition, Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine: <http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/2015pne.pdf>
- The American Medical Directors Association: Immunization in Long-Term Care Tool Kit. www.amda.com. 1-800-876-2632

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NCCNHR is a nonprofit membership organization founded in 1975 by Elma L. Holder to protect the rights safety and dignity of America's long-term care residents.