

PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH DURING COLD AND FLU SEASON



Every year during the winter months, many people catch the seasonal flu virus, common cold or get sick from other infections. As much as we want to keep our families healthy, we also have a role to play in protecting others—especially young children and babies who can get very sick.

Most adults have to take a few days off work if they catch a cold or flu, but children and babies could end up with life-threatening complications if they get infected. In fact, healthy babies under a year have the highest risk of death from the flu. We all have a role to play.

How should I protect myself and others?

When done together, these three steps are the best way to protect you and your loved ones, and prevent the spread of infection to others:

1. Get vaccinated, as soon as possible.
 - get the flu shot for free at your doctor's office, pharmacy or at public flu clinics in the fall – if you are already at CHEO for a clinic appointment, you can get your flu shot at CHEO's KidCare pharmacy
 - the earlier you get the shot the better, but it's never too late in the season to get you and your family vaccinated.
 - the flu shot helps protect those who can't be vaccinated, like small babies or sick children
2. Wash hands regularly.
 - use soap and water and hand sanitizer whenever you can and wash for 15 seconds
 - always wash your hands before you eat
 - never touch a baby or young child without first washing your hands
 - wash your hands after touching commonly touched surfaces like doorknobs and handrails
3. Stay home if you or your children are sick.

Even if you get the flu shot, you can still spread infection to others. If you or your child is sick:

 - stay home until you have been fever free without the use of anti-fever medication for 24 hours and are feeling better
 - choose wisely on whether or not to come to the emergency department – if you're unsure, visit cheo.on.ca for resources on when to come to the ED



The flu vaccine

The flu vaccine works for 7-9 out of 10 healthy children and adults, if there is a good match between the dead virus particles used to make the vaccine and the actual flu viruses that are going around.

Who should get the flu shot

- everyone older than six months of age – even pregnant women

Flu vaccine myths

There are lots of myths when it comes to the flu vaccine. Educate yourself and others so our whole community can protect ourselves and each other.

"If I get the flu shot, I can't infect babies and children."

You should always get your flu shot if you are going to be near children and babies. However, you can still get the flu or other infections that can be life-threatening to little ones. That's why the flu shot should always be used in together with frequent hand washing and staying home if you are sick.

"The flu shot has live virus in it that can give you the flu."

This isn't true. The flu vaccine is made of dead particles of past flu viruses. Some people experience a low-grade fever and muscle aches similar to a cold after getting the shot, but these don't last long. The flu doesn't have the live virus in it, so it can't make you sick.

"The flu shot never works for me, I still get sick."

Every year, health experts try to predict what strain of the flu will go around. The flu shot will protect most people, but it doesn't protect you from other infections like the common cold. That's why it's so important to do additional things to prevent getting sick, like hand washing and staying home if you're sick.

"Pregnant and breast feeding women shouldn't get the flu shot."

This isn't true. Pregnant women should definitely get the flu shot because the protection will extend to their baby when they are born as well. The flu shot has no live virus in it, so it's safe for breast feeding moms too.

"The flu shot can cause autism or Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS)."

This is not true. Some people are concerned about the use of thimerosal (an ingredient to stop bacteria growth) because it breaks down into a kind of mercury. The World Health Organization and the Institute of Medicine have concluded that thimerosal does not cause autism.

There may be a one in a million chance of getting GBS after a flu shot, but the chance of getting very sick with the flu is much higher. It's important to weigh concerns about the rare occurrence of GBS with the very real chance of serious problems the flu can cause like coma, seizures or movement disorders similar to GBS.

"It's too late in the season to get vaccinated."

This isn't true. The flu season peaks in December or even March and can even extend into late May. Vaccinating at any time during this "peak season" can protect yourself and others from being sick.