

# Women's Health

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## INFLUENZA: What You Should Know

Seasonal epidemics of influenza (flu) occur every year in the United States, beginning in the fall. Typically, the epidemics cause about 36,000 deaths and 200,000 hospitalizations. Most of the people who die are older than 65, but many of those who are hospitalized are younger than 4. Since the 1940's a vaccine has been available to prevent influenza; unfortunately it is not used as much as it should be. To prevent the hospitalizations and deaths caused every year by the influenza virus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is recommending that all U.S. citizens receive the influenza vaccine which would save thousands of lives.

Influenza is a virus that infects the nose, throat, windpipe, and lungs, and is highly contagious. It is spread from one person to another by coughing, sneezing or talking. Typical symptoms include fever, chills, muscle aches, congestion, cough, runny nose and difficulty breathing. Because influenza is a virus, it **can not** be successfully treated with antibiotics. The influenza vaccine will prevent about 70 – 90 out of every 100 people who receive it from developing moderate-to severe influenza infection.

There are two different influenza vaccines. The "inactivated" influenza vaccine is made by taking influenza viruses, growing them in eggs, purifying them and completely inactivating them with the chemical formaldehyde. This vaccine is given as a shot. The inactivated vaccine can cause pain, redness or tenderness at the site of the injection. It can also cause muscle aches and a low-grade fever, but because the vaccine viruses are completely inactivated they cannot cause influenza.

The "live, weakened" influenza vaccine is made so that it cannot grow in the lungs. However, because the weakened viruses can grow in the lining of the nose, they induce an excellent protective immune response. FluMist is also made by growing the viruses in eggs and is given as a nasal spray. The live weakened vaccine can cause mild congestion and runny nose. However, because the live, weakened vaccine has been modified so that it cannot grow in the lungs, it cannot cause pneumonia.

Both vaccines contain the three different strains of influenza viruses likely to cause disease that year. For the first time the 2008-2009 influenza vaccine contains all new strains of influenza. In the past, only one or two of the strains have been changed at a time. The influenza vaccine is given every year because the strains of influenza viruses that circulate every year are different. Influenza has a unique ability to change the proteins that reside on the surface of the virus. These changes mean that people naturally infected or immunized one year are not usually protected the next year.

The influenza vaccine does have one side effect that can be quite serious. The vaccine contains small quantities of egg proteins and people allergic to eggs can have a severe, but rarely fatal, allergic reaction. This reaction happens in about one out of every 2 million people who receive the vaccine. For this reason people who are allergic to eggs, and are at high risk of severe influenza infection, should receive the vaccine under a protocol administered by a physician that minimizes the risk of an allergic reaction. Anyone allergic to eggs will not be given the vaccine in the Health Center. We encourage those students to make arrangements with their home health care provider.

All people, no matter how healthy, are at some risk for developing severe or even fatal influenza infections. Therefore anyone who wants to decrease their chance of getting influenza should be immunized. High risk groups include: people with asthma, chronic diseases, older than 50, pregnant women, and children between 6 months and 18 years of age. Individuals living in close quarters, such as residence halls, are at increased risk as well.

Women's Health / Health Center will have the "inactivated" vaccine available to **STUDENTS ONLY** beginning October 7, 2008. The cost is \$17 which can be paid in cash, check or billed to your student account. If supplies remain after Fall Break, vaccine distribution will be opened to faculty and staff at the cost of \$20.