

Flu in South Africa and flu vaccines

Influenza (also known as flu) kills between 6000-11,000 South Africans every year. About half of those deaths are in the elderly, and about 30% in HIV-infected people. The highest rates of hospitalization are in the elderly (65 years and older), HIV-infected people and children less than 5 years old. Pregnant women are also at increased risk of hospitalization and death from flu infections. People with tuberculosis and those with chronic illnesses like diabetes, lung disease and heart disease are also at increased risk of being hospitalized from the flu. During the flu season in South Africa about 14% of patients hospitalised for pneumonia and 25% of patients with flu-like illness (fever and cough) will test positive for flu.

In South Africa, flu circulation is highly seasonal and circulates during the winter. The average season starts the first week of June; however, it could start as early as April or as late as July. The season typically lasts about 12 weeks but can be as short as 7 weeks or as long as 25 weeks. If you are interested in learning more about the flu season, check out the website for the National Institute for Communicable Diseases of the National Health Laboratory Service (www.nicd.ac.za). There you will find weekly updates on influenza virus activity in South Africa during the winter.

Getting a flu vaccine is the best way to prevent getting sick from influenza this winter. The best time to get your flu vaccine is before the season starts (March-June) but getting it later will protect you during the remainder of the season. Vaccinating people with higher risk of severe flu directly protects them from flu infections. In addition, vaccinating people in close contact with people in high risk groups may provide indirect protection by limiting their exposure to flu viruses. Vaccinating close contacts is important for protecting infants less than 6 months old who are too young to get a flu injection, and those with weak immune systems that might not respond to the vaccine (like the elderly or young children). Vaccinating pregnant moms has been shown to provide protection to both mom and baby during the flu season. HIV-infected adults without severely weakened immune systems respond well to the vaccine too. HIV-infected children may benefit from getting a flu vaccine but there are few studies available to know this for sure.

What is influenza (also known as flu)?

Influenza or flu is a group of viruses that spread from person to person. Flu can cause many different symptoms but commonly causes fever, cough, sore throat and body aches. It can also cause headache, fatigue, muscle pain, shivers, vomiting and diarrhea.

How do you get flu?

Flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are close by. You can also get flu by touching a surface or an object that has flu virus on it and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose.

How long is a person with influenza contagious?

People with flu may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before they know that they are sick, as well as while they are sick. A person with flu may be contagious 1 day before symptoms appear and for 3-7 days after the onset of symptoms. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, may be able to infect others for an even longer time

How soon will I get sick if I am exposed to the flu?

The time from when a person is exposed to a flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1 to 4 days, with an average of about 2 days.

What's in the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine contains 3 different types of inactivated flu viruses or pieces of those viruses (called subunits). Inactivated means that the viruses have been changed (killed) and cannot make you sick. The viruses in the flu injection are named for the year they were found and the place they were found. This year's vaccine was updated with a new virus to try to match what we expect to be circulating. Per World Health Organization recommendations, the current vaccine contains:

1. An A/Michigan/45/2015 (H1N1)pdm09-like virus
2. An A/HongKong/4801/2014 (H3N2)-like virus
3. A B Brisbane/60/2008-like virus

Who should get the flu vaccine?

- Pregnant and post-partum women (any time during pregnancy)
- HIV-infected people
- Healthcare workers
- People with chronic diseases (diabetes, lung disease, heart disease, kidney disease, etc.)
- Persons aged 65 years and older
- Residents of old-age homes, chronic care, and rehabilitation institutions
- Children over 6 months old on long-term aspirin therapy
- Adults and children in close contact with individuals at risk of severe flu
- Anyone 6 months of age or older wishing to reduce the risk of getting flu or spreading flu to others

Who should NOT get the flu vaccine?

Anyone who has had a severe reaction to the flu vaccine or any component of the vaccine including egg protein. Severe reactions include difficulty breathing, drop in blood pressure, Guillain-Barre syndrome (loss of sensation and/or paralysis starting from the feet) or anything that required hospitalisation.

Can I get the flu vaccine when I am sick?

Yes, if you have a mild cold or flu-like symptoms you can still get the flu vaccine, even if you have a fever. If you are sick enough to require a visit to the emergency department or the hospital you should wait until you are feeling better to get your flu vaccine.

How effective is the flu vaccine?

On average the vaccine is about 60% effective in healthy adults. The elderly, children less than 2 years old and people with weakened immune systems may not respond as well to the vaccine, but still get some protection from it. The flu vaccine does not prevent other viruses from causing colds during the winter season, it only prevents influenza viruses.

If I received flu vaccine last year do I still need to get one again this year?

Yes. The strains of flu viruses can change from year to year. The vaccine may also change to protect against the most recent flu virus strains. Even if the flu strains in the vaccine do not change, yearly vaccination is still recommended as protection from flu vaccination is not long lasting.

How safe is the vaccine?

Flu vaccines have been used to prevent flu infections since the 1950s. The flu vaccine contains viruses or pieces of viruses that are inactivated and cannot cause flu infection. Some people will get a little fever and soreness around the site of the vaccine. Flu vaccines are safe for pregnant women and their babies. Rarely, flu vaccines may cause other side effects.

How do I prevent flu from spreading if I get sick?

Stay at home and limit contact with others. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and throw away used tissue. Wash your hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub. Clean surfaces that you touch frequently around the house.

How do I treat the flu if I get sick?

In addition to treating symptoms with over-the-counter medicines and drinking fluids to prevent dehydration, there are special medicines available called “antiviral” drugs that can help reduce the time you are sick and reduce the chance of you needing to go to hospital. These medicines work best if they are started soon after symptoms appear (preferably within 48 hours) but may still provide some benefit to hospitalised patients and patients at risk of needing hospitalisation. If you think you have the flu contact your health care provider to see if you may benefit from antiviral treatment.

Where can I get more information about flu vaccines or influenza?

The following websites can provide more information about flu vaccines and influenza:

- The World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/topics/influenza/en/>
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/flu
- The National Institute for Communicable Diseases: www.nicd.ac.za