

Audience: Parents (all)

CDC Matte Article: 2016-2017 Flu Season

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The flu vaccine—Protection from the flu. Peace of mind for you.

As a parent, you feel helpless when your child is sick and flu can hit children hard, leaving them feeling miserable. Symptoms include fever, chills, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, and fatigue. Sadly, every year some children are hospitalized and die from flu complications. Why not do everything you can to help protect your children against the flu this season? You can start by getting them vaccinated.

A flu vaccine is the best way to protect against the flu and everyone can benefit from that protection. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a flu vaccine every year. That includes all children from babies 6 months and older to teens, to parents, to everyone who comes in contact with children.

A flu vaccine is especially important for children younger than 5 years old and children of any age with certain chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes or neurologic disorders. Those children are at high risk of getting serious complications from flu, like pneumonia, which can lead to hospitalization and even death.

CDC estimates that since 2010, flu-related hospitalizations among children younger than 5 years ranged from 7,000 to 26,000 in the United States. Since 2004-2005, flu-related deaths in children reported to CDC during regular flu seasons have ranged from 37 deaths (2011-2012) to 171 deaths (2012-2013). Influenza-related deaths in children are tragic. Even more tragic is the fact that past data indicate that among children 6 months and older, 80 to 85 percent of flu-related pediatric deaths occurred in children who have not received a flu vaccine. During the 2015-2016 season, some reported flu-associated deaths occurred in children who had an underlying medical condition that placed them at high risk of developing serious flu complications, but about 60 percent were otherwise healthy, underscoring the fact that even healthy children can become very ill from flu.

Flu vaccination is the best weapon we have to protect against flu. A flu shot can have mild side effects, such as soreness or swelling where the vaccine was received, a mild fever, or body aches. While these side effects can be uncomfortable and inconvenient, they are mild and usually resolve quickly. While flu vaccine can vary in how well it works each year, the vaccine does protect against illness and can prevent serious flu outcomes like hospitalization.

“Parents who take the time to get their children vaccinated can rest a little easier knowing they are helping to protect their family against an illness that can have serious complications,” says Dr. Daniel Jernigan, Director of the Influenza Division in the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Of course parents should get vaccinated, too.”

Children, and everyone else, should get a flu vaccine by the end of October, if possible. Since it takes about two weeks after vaccination for the antibodies that protect against influenza virus infection to develop in the body, it is best that people get vaccinated early in the season so they are protected before flu viruses begin spreading in their community. However, as long as flu viruses are circulating, vaccination can still be beneficial, even in January or later. Flu viruses can continue spreading as late as May. Keep in mind that the flu vaccine does not provide protection against non-flu viruses that can cause colds and other respiratory symptoms similar to those caused by flu.

For many children, one flu shot will be sufficient this season, but some children between the ages of 6 months and 8 years may require two doses of flu vaccine given at least four weeks apart. This includes all children in this age group who are getting vaccinated for the first time and children who have only ever received one dose in their lifetime. Your child's health care provider can tell you whether your child needs two doses in order to be fully protected against the flu. Children needing two doses of vaccine should start the process early enough that two doses can be given before flu season starts.

Babies younger than 6 months are too young to get a flu vaccine, but they are at high risk for complications, including hospitalization and death, if they become very sick from the flu. Therefore, it is important that pregnant women, family members and anyone who cares for young infants get vaccinated to help prevent the spread of flu viruses to young babies.

Help put your mind at ease by protecting your child against flu this season. Flu vaccines are offered in many convenient locations. For example, you and your child can get vaccinated at your doctor's office, pharmacy, at local health clinics and at flu clinics at local retail outlets. Use the vaccine finder at <http://vaccine.healthmap.org/> to find where you can get flu vaccine near you.

Since October 2013, more Americans, even those with preexisting conditions, have qualified for health insurance coverage that fits their budget and needs. It includes many free screenings, vaccinations, and counseling. Visit www.HealthCare.gov or call 1-800-318-2596 to learn more.

For more information about flu and the benefits of the flu vaccine, talk to your doctor or nurse, visit the CDC flu website (<http://www.cdc.gov/flu>), or call CDC at 1-800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636).