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Questions & answers: the flu and the flu shot

The symptoms of the flu and its complications (leading to hospitalizations and deaths) vary depending on individual characteristics (age and health), and the specific flu strains circulating each year. Here are answers to questions you as a healthcare worker may be asking about the flu and the flu vaccine.

I'm a healthcare worker, do I need to get a flu shot?

Yes. Experts recommend that all healthcare workers get a flu shot to limit the transmission of the virus to people at a high risk of complications. In terms of the flu shot, a healthcare worker is defined as follows: anyone who provides care to or is in close contact with high-risk individuals as defined by the Protocole d'immunisation du Québec (PIQ), whether in a hospital, long-term care centre, medical or dental clinic, CLSC or in any other residential or care-providing environment. [...] The term includes healthcare trainees and their instructors. In addition to the above-mentioned individuals, this term also includes first responders who provide care.”¹



¹For the full definition and examples, see the PIQ: msss.gouv.qc.ca

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Who is at a high risk of complications?

The flu is an acute viral infection that spreads easily from person to person. It's a contagious disease that is surely present in your environment and your community. If you're in good health, you may fight off the flu but you may also spread the virus and contaminate those around you and the clients your facility serves.

Among those you come into contact with, some have a higher risk of complications:

- **People of any age (including pregnant women) with chronic illnesses** (such as heart or lung problems, diabetes, cancer, compromised immune system, transplant patients, etc.)
- **Residents of any age** in nursing homes and long-term care facilities
- **People over the age of 75**
- **Healthy pregnant women** in their second or third trimester

A good many of the individuals who use healthcare services in institutions are in these high-risk groups.



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The priority is to give the shot to healthcare workers who provide direct services to users.

Why not just give every patient a flu shot?

Even if all at-risk individuals were given a flu shot, the most effective vaccine would protect only 60% of them. Several factors affect the vaccine's effectiveness: age, the health of the recipient's immune system, and how close the flu strains in the vaccine match those that are actually circulating. For patients with a high risk of complications, the flu vaccine decreases mainly the risk of hospitalization or death.

Plus, since some people can't get the shot because of contraindications and others never get the information about it or a recommendation to get the shot, it would be hard to vaccinate everyone who is at risk.

It is still recommended that healthcare workers get the flu shot, especially if you have many contacts with individuals who have a high risk of complications. The priority is to give the shot to healthcare workers who provide direct services to patients in hospitals and long-term care centres.

The scientific evidence showing that vaccinating healthcare workers indirectly reduces patient illness and death is of low quality. However, it is true that the flu shot prevents transmission to patients and makes it easier to control flu outbreaks by reducing case numbers.



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Are there any side effects to getting the flu shot?

The flu shot is safe. However, you may experience some side effects after receiving the vaccine, such as fatigue, headache, and muscle or joint pain. The side effects usually do not last long.



Are there other ways to protect high-risk people from getting the flu or another respiratory infection?

It's vital that respiratory infection prevention and control (IPC) measures be applied in our institutions. These measures include the following:

- **Don't go to work if you have flu symptoms** (e.g., fever), and follow your employer's back-to-work guidelines.
- **Always practice basic prevention** such as hand hygiene and wearing a medical mask.
- **Carefully follow all the infection prevention measures** recommended by the facility.

It's recommended that people at a high risk of complications, and healthcare workers get a flu shot every year, whether they had one the year before or not.

Should I get a flu shot every year?

Yes. The protection that the flu shot provides decreases after a few months.

In addition, the strains included in the vaccine differ from year to year. Every year, a new vaccine is produced to provide the best possible protection against the viruses that will be circulating. In Québec, the injectable vaccine for adults is composed of the virus strains most likely to be present in the northern hemisphere. The strains are selected by the World Health Organization. This means that the flu shot offered this year may be different than last year's shot. It's therefore recommended that people get a flu shot every year.

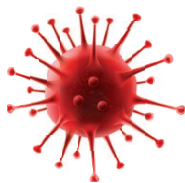
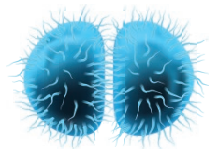


Since I'm vaccinated against COVID-19, am I also protected against the flu?

No, because they are two different viruses. The COVID-19 vaccine protects you against COVID-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, but it offers no protection against the flu caused by the influenza virus. It's therefore important to get the flu shot even if you've been vaccinated against COVID-19.

Where can I get my flu shot?

Healthcare workers are entitled to a free flu shot, often at their place of work. Check with your Health Department for details. On the other hand, you can also get the shot at your local CLSC. If you do, make sure the information is entered in your vaccination record and tell your Health Department so that your vaccination record is kept up-to-date.



Differences between the flu and a cold



| SYMPTOMS | FLU | COLD |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Fever | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common • Temperature of 38°C to 40°C (100.4°F to 104°F) • Sudden onset | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None or mild |
| Cough | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common • Sudden onset | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common • Mild or moderate |
| Headache | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common • Sometimes severe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rare |
| Aches and pains | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common • Sometimes severe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rare • Mild |
| Fatigue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common • Severe • Lasts a few days, sometimes longer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common • Mild |
| Nausea and vomiting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rare in adults • More common in children • Often with diarrhea and abdominal pain in children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rare • Mild |
| Runny or stuffy nose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rare, more common in children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common |
| Sneezing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rare | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common |
| Sore throat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common |

The symptoms of COVID-19 are the same as for the flu and cold. Symptoms may range from very mild to very severe. However, one of the characteristic symptoms of COVID-19 is the loss of taste and smell with no nasal congestion.

FOR MORE INFO

Contact the Infection Prevention & Control Department or Health Department at your facility.

You can also go to the ASSTSAS website (asstsas.qc.ca) or the [Québec.ca/vaccingrippe](https://www.quebec.ca/vaccingrippe) website.

<https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/advice-and-prevention/vaccination/flu-vaccination-program>

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