



Georgia Department of Human Resources

INFLUENZA IN GEORGIA

Influenza, also called "flu," is a highly infectious viral illness commonly causing fever, muscle aches and coughing. Seasonal epidemics occur yearly in the fall and winter months. Approximately 5-20% of Georgia's population gets the flu every year. During an average flu season, 36,000 Americans die and more than 200,000 are hospitalized due to complications from influenza. Some people, such as young children, the elderly, and people with certain chronic health conditions are more likely to have a severe complication related to influenza. While most deaths occur among the elderly, deaths can also occur among younger adults and children. During the 2003-2004 influenza season, 10 children in Georgia died of illnesses related to influenza.

Who can get flu?

Influenza is very contagious, and anyone can become infected. Influenza spreads easily from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The influenza virus can also survive on surfaces outside the human body for hours. People can become infected by getting the virus on their hands and then rubbing their eyes or nose. Healthy adults can be infectious from one day before they have symptoms until 5 days after their beginning of symptoms. They can pass influenza to others even before they feel ill.

What are the symptoms of flu?

Typical symptoms include high fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, headache, muscle aches, and often extreme fatigue. Gastrointestinal symptoms like nausea, vomiting or diarrhea are more common among young children. People with flu usually recover completely in one to two weeks, but some people suffer severe complications, such as pneumonia.

Is there a vaccine for the flu?

Yes. There are two different types of vaccine: a shot and a nasal-spray. The "flu shot" is an inactivated vaccine containing killed influenza viruses and the nasal-spray is a vaccine with live-attenuated influenza viruses. Each year, the vaccines are updated with the new strains of influenza that are expected to dominate during the winter months. Because the circulating influenza viruses change constantly, people should get a new flu shot every year. The flu vaccine will not protect you against other respiratory viruses that cause colds and other illnesses.

Who should get a flu vaccine?

The influenza vaccine or "flu shot" is approved for people 6 months and older, including healthy people and people with chronic health conditions. The nasal-spray vaccine is approved for healthy people 5 to 49 years of age who are not pregnant. Anyone wanting to protect themselves against flu can be vaccinated, but vaccination is recommended for people most likely to experience complications of the flu. Those at highest risk include people 65 years and older; people who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities that house those with long-term illnesses; adults and children 6 months and older with chronic heart or lung conditions, including asthma; adults and children 6 months and older who needed regular medical care or were in a hospital during the previous year because of a metabolic disease (such as diabetes), chronic kidney disease, or weakened immune system (including immune system problems caused by medicines or by infection with human immunodeficiency virus [HIV/AIDS]); children 6 months to 18 years of age who are on long-

fact sheet

term aspirin therapy (children given aspirin while they have influenza are at risk of Reye syndrome.); women who will be pregnant during the influenza season; all children 6 to 23 months of age; people with any condition that can compromise respiratory function or the handling of respiratory secretions (that is, a condition that makes it hard to breathe or swallow, such as brain injury or disease, spinal cord injuries, seizure disorders, or other nerve or muscle disorders.) People 50 to 64 years of age are also recommended to receive vaccine because nearly one-third of people 50 to 64 years of age in the United States have one or more medical conditions that place them at increased risk for serious complications from influenza. People who can transmit influenza to others at high risk for complications are also recommended to receive yearly vaccine, including all health-care workers, household contacts and out-of-home caregivers of children 0 to 23 months of age, and close contacts of people 65 years and older.

Who should not be vaccinated?

Some people should not be vaccinated without first consulting a physician. They include people who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs; people who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past; people who developed *Guillain-Barré syndrome* within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine previously; children less than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for use in this age group); and people who have a moderate or severe illness with a fever should wait to get vaccinated until their symptoms lessen.

Where can I get a flu vaccine?

Flu vaccines are given at most public health departments and doctors' offices as well as some pharmacies, workplaces, and other community settings. The best time to get vaccinated is in October or November, but people can still get vaccinated in December and later. Flu season can begin as early as October and can end as late as May.

What are the vaccine side effects?

The flu shot contains only killed viruses and cannot give you the flu. The vaccine boosts the immune response against influenza. Some minor side effects that could occur are soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot was given, low grade fever or aches that last 1-2 days. The nasal-spray vaccine contains weakened viruses and does not cause the severe symptoms of an influenza illness. Side effects could include runny nose, headache, vomiting, aches, fever, sore throat or cough. Serious side effects are very uncommon with either vaccine and the risks associated with the disease are much greater than the risks associated with the vaccine.

What can I do to keep from getting the flu?

The best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each year. Also wash your hands frequently, and avoid rubbing your eyes or nose. If you do get the flu, get plenty of rest, and drink plenty of caffeine-free liquids to avoid becoming dehydrated. To reduce fever, take a non-aspirin pain reliever. There are four antiviral medications approved for the treatment of the flu: amantadine, rimantadine, zanamivir, and oseltamivir. They require a doctor's prescription and are only effective if started within 48 hours of getting symptoms. Three medications (amantadine, rimantadine, oseltamivir) are also approved for prevention of influenza.

Where can I get more information?

For more information about influenza, contact the Division of Public Health at (404) 657-2700.