



**2014-2015 Influenza Vaccination Key Messages and
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for the Public**

December 9, 2014

Resources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.com/flu

New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH): www.nj.com/health/flu

Key Messages:

Health officials are beginning to see increased influenza illness in parts of the United States and in New Jersey. While it is impossible to predict how bad the flu season will be, early monitoring suggests that the type of flu virus most common this season is the type which can cause severe disease. New Jersey is currently seeing moderate levels of influenza activity, which is typical for this time of year and flu activity is expected to increase in the coming weeks.

This year's influenza vaccine may not provide complete protection against all of the circulating strains. When a circulating flu virus is different from vaccine viruses, it is still recommended that persons get a flu shot. Even if the vaccine might not provide complete protection against one of the strains, it still offers protection against the other flu viruses that are present in the vaccine.

Health care providers should continue to encourage patients to get vaccinated.

Three recommendations to fight flu:

1. Get vaccinated, either by flu shot or nose spray. Vaccination is an important part of protecting against flu and serious complications
2. Cover coughs and sneezes, stay away from sick people (and stay home if sick) and wash hands often to help stop the spread of viruses, such as flu
3. Treat flu illness to prevent serious complications; ask your healthcare provider about medication (antivirals) as soon as you notice flu symptoms.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about influenza:

I have heard that this year's flu vaccine will not protect me from getting the flu.

Influenza vaccination for any unvaccinated persons is one of the best ways to protect against the flu. Flu vaccine protects against three or four different types of flu viruses, depending on which vaccine you got. Even if the vaccine does not provide complete protection against one of the strains, it might offer some protection and will provide protection against the other strains in the vaccine.

I have heard that this is going to be a bad flu season. Why is that?

There are many different strains of flu. Certain types of flu viruses cause more serious illness than others. Influenza A (H3N2) viruses are being found most often. When this is the case, it is common to see more illness, hospitalizations and deaths due to flu. Flu vaccine is the best way to protect against the seasonal influenza virus.

It is just the flu, what is the big deal?

The CDC estimates that more than 200,000 people nationwide are hospitalized each year for flu or flu-related complications; flu-associated deaths range from 3,000-49,000 each year. There are steps you can take to prevent the flu, including getting a flu shot, washing your hands frequently, covering coughs and sneezes, staying home if sick and staying away from sick people.

Who should get the flu shot?

The flu vaccination is recommended for anyone six months of age and older. It is a safe and effective way to prevent getting the flu. Vaccination is important for people at high risk for flu-related complications. This includes infants, pregnant women, kids and adults with chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease, and older adults. It is also important for persons who live with or provide care for persons at high risk for complications get vaccinated. Getting vaccinated will help prevent you from getting sick and passing the illness to others.

Are children in NJ who attend childcare/preschool still required to get the flu shot?

Yes, children who are six through 59 months of age and attend licensed childcare/preschool facilities in New Jersey are required to receive a dose of flu vaccine prior to December 31 each year. A child who is not vaccinated by December 31 will be excluded from childcare/preschool until he/she turns 60 months of age, he/she receives one dose of the vaccine, or until the end of flu season (April 1).

Is the nose spray vaccine as effective as the flu shot?

Nasal spray and regular flu shots are both effective ways to protect you from getting the flu. The only difference between the two is one uses a needle and the other does not. It does not matter which kind of vaccination type you pick, both offer protection against the flu.

Why doesn't this year's flu shot contain the "right stuff"?

Flu viruses are constantly changing. They change from one season to the next. Sometimes, they change during the same season. When this happens, it is called an "antigenic drift." Keep in mind that while the flu shot may not be as effective, it still offers protection against the flu virus.

How did you find out that there was a "drift" associated with the vaccine?

When the vaccine viruses for 2014-2015 were first selected, there was a different strain that was most common. But, during routine monitoring of flu samples in the summer and early fall, it was found that a different type was more common. There is no way to predict in advance if there will be a drift.

If the flu shot isn't effective, why should I get one?

Vaccination offers the best protection we have against seasonal flu. Flu vaccination can still reduce flu illnesses, doctor's visits and missed work/school due to flu. It can also help to prevent flu-related hospitalizations and deaths. Antibodies (infection fighting cells) created through vaccination with one flu virus can sometimes offer protection against drifted flu viruses (cross-protection). The flu vaccine will also provide protection against the other two or three virus strains in the vaccine.

Is it too late to get a flu shot?

It is not too late to get vaccinated. Contact your health care provider to schedule an appointment. You may also get a flu shot at your local health department or commercial or grocery store pharmacy. The NJDOH website has a flu shot locator: www.state.nj.us/health/flu/findflushot.shtml

Is there enough flu vaccine this year?

There are multiple manufacturers who supply vaccine for use in the United State during flu season. They estimate more than 150 million doses of flu vaccine will be available for the 2014-2015 influenza season.

What is the best way to treat the flu?

Antivirals are prescription medications that treat illness caused by viruses (antibiotics treat illnesses caused by bacteria; antibiotics are not effective against viruses). Antiviral treatment works best when it is started within 48 hours of getting sick. Treatment with flu antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and shorter and can lessen the risk of being hospitalized or dying from flu.

Are antivirals safe for all ages?

Antiviral treatment works best when it is started within 48 hours of getting sick and are effective for all ages and risk groups. Treating high risk people or people who are very sick with flu with antiviral drugs is important. It can mean the difference between having a milder illness instead of a serious illness that could result in a hospital stay. You should talk to your health care provider to determine what treatment is best for you and your loved ones.

What types of antiviral drugs are available to treat flu?

Two approved drugs are recommended for use in the United States for the 2014-2015 flu season: oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza).