



Ask Us About...

The Flu & Your Family

Influenza (flu) viruses are constantly changing. Each flu season, different viruses spread and can affect people differently based on the body's ability to fight infection. Even healthy children and adults can get very sick from the flu and spread it to family and friends. What can you do to keep your family healthy during flu season? Beverly Connelly, MD, director of infection control at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center answers some common questions.

Is the flu really that serious?

I don't like to use scare tactics, but the reality is flu seasons are unpredictable and can be severe — flu deaths over the last 30 years have ranged from a low of 3,000 to a high of 49,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Right here in Cincinnati, every flu season we see about 80 to 100 children hospitalized with complications from the flu. Many of these kids are perfectly healthy otherwise, so it can happen to anyone. I simply do not want to see one more child in our intensive care unit with a condition that could easily be prevented by getting a flu vaccine.

What's the single most important thing parents need to know about keeping their kids healthy during flu season?

Make sure everyone in your "family circle" gets vaccinated! Getting a flu vaccination is the most important step in protecting your children and family from influenza and its complications. When it comes to protecting children, it's critical for everyone in your child's family circle to be vaccinated — this includes parents, grandparents, siblings, caregivers, etc. This will help create a "circle of protection" around your children, especially young infants under six months of age who are particularly vulnerable as they cannot be vaccinated.

I see a lot of advertisements for flu shots these days — where I should I go to get my family vaccinated?

There are many places you can go to get a flu shot; however, your primary care provider — your pediatrician, family doctor, nurse practitioner or physician assistant — is your best option, especially for your children. Your family doctor will be able to answer your specific questions and will advise you on whether your child will need one or two doses this season.

When should my family get vaccinated?

Flu vaccines typically become available in late summer and early fall — check with your family physicians to see when they will begin receiving the vaccine. Once your family doctor has the vaccine in stock, it's a good idea to get vaccinated as early in the season as possible, especially if you have family members in high-risk groups.

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—Dr. Beverly Connelly

Who needs the flu vaccine?

Everyone over the age of six months should get vaccinated. This is especially important for caregivers of children under six months and children with chronic conditions.



More Advice from Dr. Connelly

As the director of infection control at Cincinnati Children's, Dr. Connelly says she has seen too many children hospitalized for complications from influenza.

The disruption caused by missed school days and work days is only part of the story. Tragically, some children even die. Her number one piece of advice is simple: make sure your child and everyone in his/her circle gets vaccinated. Here are some additional tips:

- The early bird gets the worm. Back-to-school wellness checks are a great time to get your child vaccinated. And don't worry — if your family gets the vaccine as early as August it will still provide full protection throughout the flu season.
- If you aren't an early bird, there's another saying that applies to you: better late than never! While influenza outbreaks can happen as early as October (which makes August and September the best time for flu vaccines), influenza activity usually peaks in January or later, so getting the vaccine in November, December, January and beyond will still provide important protection for you and your family.
- Think of flu season as a marathon, not a sprint, and practice prevention consistently throughout flu season.
- As much as possible, try to keep your kids away from people who are ill.
- Be aware that you can become infected by touching surfaces where germs remain and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Wash or sanitize your hands frequently. Germs in a cough or sneeze can travel three to six feet through the air, settle on surrounding objects and remain contagious for several hours. Gross but true! That's why it's so important to cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze.

If you have questions and/or concerns about flu vaccines, talk to your primary care provider (pediatrician, family doctor, nurse practitioner or physician assistant).

What if my child has a chronic condition?

Children with chronic conditions have a harder time fighting the flu. If they do get the flu, they may get very sick and end up in the hospital. As I said earlier, every year about 80 to 100 children are hospitalized at Cincinnati Children's because of complications from flu such as severe pneumonia. Underlying asthma is a risk for many of these children; however, it's important to remember children with no previous health issues are among those hospitalized with severe flu-related disease.

Are there different kinds of flu vaccine?

Yes, there are different kinds of flu vaccine and two that are options for children. The "live" nose-spray vaccine (also called LAIV for Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine) is made with live, weakened flu viruses. These viruses do not cause the flu and the nasal spray option may be more appealing to younger children. LAIV is approved for use in healthy children age two and older and adults who are not pregnant and are under age 49. Anyone over the age of six months including those with chronic health conditions can get the flu "shot" made with inactivated or "killed" flu virus. Ask your primary care provider for details on which option is best for your family.

Call your primary care provider to
schedule flu vaccinations for your family.