

Fight flu early with annual vaccine, doctors urge

October 8 2014, by Erin Howe



Extracting vaccine from a vial. Credit: CDC Image 5402 by Jim Gathany

Very soon, people of all ages across Canada will roll up their sleeves for their flu shots.

The vaccine is already available in many doctors' offices in time to help people protect themselves from the illness.

It's impossible to predict exactly when and how severely influenza will strike, but in Canada, most cases occur between November and April.

"Get immunized as soon as possible," says Dr. Daniel Flanders, an adjunct lecturer in the department of paediatrics at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine. "Once you've been vaccinated, you're protected, no matter how early or how late the [flu](#) hits."

Every year, the World Health Organization predicts which three types of the virus are most likely to make people sick. The strains expected this year are the same ones contained in last year's vaccine. But even if you got the shot last year, you will need another dose.

"Immunity decreases over time, so it is still advisable to get the vaccine again this year," says Flanders.

Flanders, who is also the owner and director of Kindercare Pediatrics and a staff physician at North York General Hospital, says there are some common misconceptions about the vaccine, including the idea that it can cause the very illness it is intended to prevent.

"The [flu shot](#) doesn't actually cause the flu," he says. "For a small number of people who receive it, the vaccine could cause some minor, temporary side effects, such as a sore arm, swelling or redness at site of the injection or some fever, but the [vaccine](#) doesn't actually contain an infectious agent, so it can't cause the flu."

Another myth is that there are [harmful toxins](#) in the flu shot.

"There are some chemicals that have their appropriate place, such as preservatives or agents that prevent bacterial contamination and infection, but they have all been rigorously studied, and demonstrated to be safe."

Another option is FluMist – a nasal spray version of the [flu vaccine](#). Unlike the injection, it contains weakened viruses that stimulate an immune response most people who receive it don't even feel.

Flanders says Health Canada recommends FluMist for kids between the ages of two and six years because it appears to be slightly more effective than the needle in that age group. The spray isn't publicly funded, but is available with a prescription and costs about \$25 dollars. A doctor must still administer FluMist, but it can save kids, and needle-phobic adults, the pain of the injection.

"We have a community responsibility to get immunization rates as high as possible so that we can protect the most vulnerable among us and those who cannot receive vaccines," says Flanders.

Provided by University of Toronto

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