



The holiday season is quickly approaching but along with the festivities and the many gatherings with family and friends, comes the dreaded influenza “flu” season. Other common illnesses, such as colds, sinusitis, earaches and stomach illness are also common during this time. The flu, however, tends to be much more of a serious illness, especially for many people with complex disabilities. Flu is caused by the highly contagious influenza virus and spread by respiratory secretions.

Individuals are at a significant risk for developing severe and potentially lethal complications from flu if they have significant cognitive disabilities, difficulties with swallowing their secretions, challenges with coughing and excreting respiratory secretions, or impaired musculoskeletal systems (i.e., cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, severe scoliosis).

Importantly, individuals in close contact with others, as well as individuals who exhibit challenges with hygiene measures, such as difficulties using tissues when coughing or sneezing, increased oral secretions, mouthing type behaviors, etc., may require additional attention during this time of year.

With rare exception, everyone who helps support individuals with developmental disabilities can play an important role in reducing serious illness and possibly death.

For more information:

Call or visit your Illinois Department of Human Services’ Family Community Resource Center (FCRC).

If you have questions about any Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) program, call or visit your FCRC. We will answer your questions. If you do not know where your FCRC is or if you are unable to go there, you may call the automated helpline 24 hours a day at:

1-800-843-6154

1-800-447-6404 (TTY)

You may speak to a representative between:
8:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.
Monday - Friday (except state holidays)

For answers to your questions, you may also write:

Illinois Department of Human Services
Bureau of Customer Support and Services
100 South Grand Avenue East
Springfield, Illinois 62762

Visit our website at:

www.dhs.state.il.us



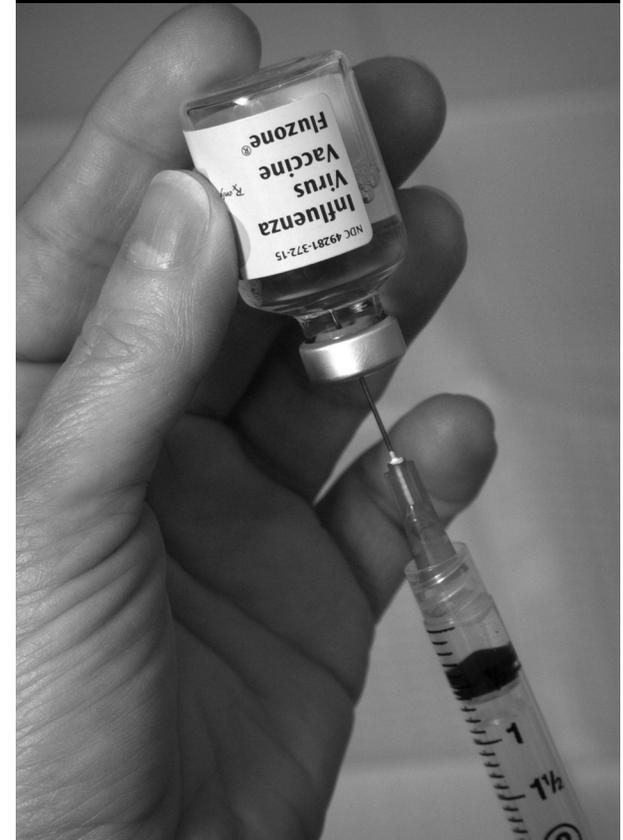
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State of Illinois
Department of Human Services

Protection Against the Flu: Advice for Caregivers of People with Disabilities





What is Influenza (Flu)

The flu is a highly contagious respiratory illness that is caused by one of many influenza (flu)viruses. The influenza virus is spread from person to person by respiratory droplets caused by coughing and sneezing. Sometimes people become infected by touching something that has been contaminated by a flu virus and then touching their mouth or nose.

People start infecting others about one day prior to exhibiting signs or symptoms. They are contagious before they know they are sick and up to 5 days after becoming sick.

Is Flu Dangerous?

Yes, flu is a deadly disease that kills approximately 36,000 people in the United States each year and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications during the flu season. Between 5% to 20% of the population gets the flu each year and complications range from viral and bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening chronic conditions such as diabetes, asthma and heart failure. Sinus and ear infections can also develop in persons prone to such conditions.

Who are at Risk

- Those 65 and older
- People who live in long-term care facilities
- People with chronic medical conditions
- Women who are or who will become pregnant during the influenza season
- All children between ages 6 - 23 months
- People with any condition that compromise respiratory functions or handle oral secretions — swallowing difficulties, brain injury (i.e., some people with developmental disabilities), people with seizure disorders, spine injury or weak muscles are all at significant risk.

Preventing the Flu

Vaccination

The single best way to protect yourself and others is to get vaccinated each fall. Getting vaccinated not only can protect yourself but your children, other family members, coworkers, and the people you support, who are at great risk of developing serious complications.

Good Habits

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others
- Stay home when you are sick
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing
- Wash your hands often and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth as much as possible
- Help others that you support to develop healthy habits
- Attempt to decrease mouthing type behaviors as much as possible
- Frequently sanitize community areas and shared belongings

Medications

There are medications (antiviral drugs) that can be prescribed by a physician to help prevent flu, reduce chances of developing severe complications and decrease the infectious period of the flu. These medications are especially important to consider in the event of exposure to persons who are ill with flu symptoms. The individuals we serve, their families and staff members of group homes should consider this option after discussing their personal health situation their personal physician.

Symptoms of Flu

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches

For some people with developmental disabilities who have challenges with communicating their needs, identifying signs and symptoms of flu may be difficult but should be strongly suspected if there are behavioral changes associated with any of the above symptoms during the flu season. In such cases a medical evaluation should be considered. There are confirmation tests that are cost effective and easy to obtain. In the event someone develops signs and symptoms of influenza in a group home setting, it is important to attempt to separate the ill individual from others (such as allowing one to stay in a private room, if available) and to seek medical attention immediately.

Vaccination

Who Should Get Vaccinated

- All Individuals in the high-risk category
- Individuals working in the health care field and those providing direct care/support to people at risk for complications and those who are known to be high-risk.
- Anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting the flu and help prevent the spread to family members, coworkers, friends and people they support

Important Facts

- Vaccination will not 100% protect someone from getting the flu, but it will reduce the chances of contracting virus.
- In the event a vaccinated person contracts influenza, being vaccinated may help decrease the duration of illness and possibly decrease the chance of spreading the illness to others.
- Remember, during flu season there are many other causes of “flu like” illness that may mimic the flu but is usually not as serious.

How Can You and Persons You Serve Get Vaccinated

- Contact a personal physician or your local health department for information on this year’s flu shot TODAY.