



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



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 by considering a few important facts.

Statistics

- ❑ Flu kills approximately 36,000 people each year.
- ❑ Flu related illness result in over 200,000 hospitalizations each year.
- ❑ People at greatest risk are
 - ❑ Individuals with chronic illness (diabetes, heart problems, etc)
 - ❑ Many individuals with complex disabilities
 - ❑ Individuals residing in congregate settings
 - ❑ All people 65 and older.
- ❑ Following vaccination, it takes approximately two weeks to develop immunity.
- ❑ Vaccination will not protect you 100% from getting the flu – but the more people immunized, the better chance we have of protecting our families, communities and people we serve.
- ❑ Remember, vaccination for flu will not protect you from other common infections during the flu season.

How can you help

- ❑ Develop a robust vaccination campaign within your organization – provide in-services, post flyers and other informational literature in break rooms, evaluate general hygiene measures.
- ❑ Strive for vaccination compliance among yourself, other staff and individuals that we serve – vaccination is the most effective means of controlling/limiting the spread of flu. Remember, when you get vaccinated, you are not only helping to protect yourself but your family, friends, coworkers and the people you serve.
- ❑ Ensure that good hygiene efforts are supported
 - ❑ Use tissues when coughing/sneezing
 - ❑ Wash hands frequently and sanitize community areas and shared objects
 - ❑ Protect individuals from respiratory and oral secretions
- ❑ Stay home when you have flu-like symptoms and help protect others from individuals who manifest flu-like symptoms
- ❑ Seek Medical attention promptly for yourself and individuals you serve, when you suspect the flu – there are effective medications available that help reduce the spreading the flu, decrease chances of serious secondary illnesses and reduce the duration of flu symptoms.

Signs and Symptoms of Flu

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| ❑ Fever (usually high) | ❑ Muscle ache |
| ❑ Dry cough | ❑ Extreme tiredness |
| ❑ Stuffy or runny nose | ❑ Sore throat |
| ❑ Headache | |

Complications of Flu

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| ❑ Viral pneumonia | ❑ Bacterial pneumonia |
| ❑ Worsening of chronic illnesses | ❑ Death |
| ❑ Organ failure | |

This is the time to prepare for the flu season – please contact your health provider and your local health department for more information about influenza and to find out more about vaccination programs in your local area.

