

Health Tips for Parents

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What do I need to know about the flu?

Children under the age of 5 years are more likely to be hospitalized from flu complications than those in other age groups. Parents should talk to their doctors about who in the family should receive the flu vaccine.



Seasonal influenza Seasonal influenza is a contagious, but preventable, respiratory illness that can be dangerous for young children. Every year, approximately 20,000 children under the age of 5 years are hospitalized because of complications from the flu, with some developing serious health problems such as pneumonia or bacterial infections. Although deaths are rare, dozens of children die from flu complications every flu season.



While influenza and the common cold are both caused by respiratory viruses, flu symptoms are significantly more severe, says Carlos Lerner, MD, medical director of UCLA's Children's Health Center. Although both illnesses can produce runny or stuffy noses and coughs, flu symptoms often also include high fevers (over 102° F), body aches, sore throat, vomiting and diarrhea.

Prevention Hand-washing, covering coughs and using alcohol-based gels can help stop the virus from spreading, but the most effective approach for prevention is the flu vaccine, Dr. Lerner advises. Because influenza is spread through droplets in the air, children suffering from flu should stay out of school until at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever. Children at higher risk of developing complications (such as those with asthma) and children with severe symptoms (such as trouble breathing or dehydration) should be examined by their healthcare provider. They may receive anti-viral medications such as Tamiflu.

Flu vaccine updated annually Unlike some viruses, influenza virus varies from season to season. While some vaccinations provide a lifetime of protection against a particular disease, a new flu vaccine is formulated every year to contain the strains expected to be most common during the upcoming flu season.

Two types of flu vaccine

Flu vaccines are available in two forms: injection and nasal spray. The injection form, which contains inactivated virus, is approved for children 6 months and older while the nasal spray, containing live but attenuated virus, is an alternative for healthy people between the ages of 2 and 49.

Because the flu vaccine is not approved for children younger than 6 months, the best way to protect these vulnerable infants is to make sure parents, elder siblings and caregivers all receive the vaccine.



When to vaccinate

Flu season typically runs between late December to March. Dr. Lerner recommends that children receive the flu vaccine as soon as it becomes available. Rare side effects include soreness or redness at the injection site, hoarseness, red eyes, cough and mild fever lasting one to two days. The flu vaccine, however, cannot make a child sick with the flu.

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood. In addition to our Children's Health Center in Westwood, we have offices in Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional.