

## From the Health Clinic



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Every year, influenza sickens millions, hospitalizes hundreds of thousands, and kills tens of thousands. This is not your average common cold. While it is especially dangerous for anyone who already has a health problem (such as a weakened immune system, or heart or lung problems), it can be dangerous for healthy people, too.

Even if you do not get that sick from the flu, aside from missing school or work there is the very real problem that influenza is very contagious - and you can be contagious before you realize that you have the flu. That means you can spread it to others, some of whom may get very sick. Getting immunized helps keep everyone safe: it's not just about you; it's about everyone around you. This is especially true for children, who are not always great about washing their hands and tend to touch lots of things and people around them.

Here are a few things all parents should know about the flu vaccine:

- 1. It is the best way to prevent the flu** - Hand washing is crucial, and staying away from sick people helps, but we cannot wash our hands every second, and we

cannot always know who is sick. It's true that the vaccine isn't 100% effective (the effectiveness varies by year) but it is your best bet if you don't want to get sick.

**2. You and your children should get it early** - The flu season runs from roughly September to March. The sooner you get it, the sooner you are protected. It is best to get it done before the end of October. This is especially true if your child is young and has not had it before, because...

**3. Children who are less than nine years old and getting the flu shot for the first time will need two doses spaced a month apart** - So getting started early is even more important for them. If your child is younger than nine and only got one dose last season, they will need two doses this season.

**4. People with egg allergy can get the flu shot** - If the allergy is severe you should talk to your doctor, as in those cases it is recommended that people be monitored and have medications to treat an allergic reaction at the ready, but it is unlikely that that anything will happen.

**5. There are very few people who should not get a flu shot** - Children less than six months old or who had a definite allergic reaction to the flu shot are the only ones who can't. Those with a history of Guillain-Barre Syndrome should talk to their doctor, but that is rare. If a child is significantly ill we will sometimes postpone the shot, but children with a minor illness like a cold can get it.

**6. There are some people who really need a flu shot** - That includes babies, who are at higher risk of complications, as well as children with asthma, other lung diseases, heart problems, weakened immune systems, or other chronic illnesses. You should call your doctor right away about getting vaccinated if your child falls into one of these groups.

**7. There is no more nasal spray version** - It did not work very well. That means a needle for everyone. But there are lots of ways to ease the pain of the needle, so talk to your doctor.

**8. You don't need to worry about thimerosal** - Thimerosal is a preservative that has been used to prevent contamination in vaccines. Some people have worried that it could be linked to autism, but it has been studied carefully and there is no actual evidence that this is true. There is no thimerosal in the vaccines we routinely give to children. There are some formulations of the flu vaccine that contain a tiny amount of thimerosal, but there are also preservative-free formulations available. Either way, your child is safe. Talk to your doctor if you have questions about this.

**9. You cannot catch the flu from the flu vaccine** - The virus in the vaccine is inactivated. As with any vaccine, there can be side effects; the most common ones are pain at the injection site or fever. But it cannot give you the flu.

