



## **Influenza and You: Important Information for Older Adults**

### **What is influenza?**

Influenza, or flu, is a seasonal respiratory (lung) infection that causes fever and a cough or sore throat. It is most common during the fall and winter months.

### **How is influenza spread?**

Influenza is easily transmitted through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person who coughs or sneezes.

### **How serious is seasonal influenza?**

In the 2013-14 season, 1,826 New Yorkers died from influenza and pneumonia, a complication of influenza. Adults 65 and older, especially those with underlying medical conditions, are most likely to experience severe illness, complications, hospitalization or death.

### **What conditions increase my risk of getting very sick with influenza?**

The following conditions increase the risk of severe illness:

- Asthma or any other chronic respiratory diseases
- Heart, kidney or liver disease
- Blood diseases, such as sickle cell anemia
- Metabolic disorders, such as diabetes
- Weakened immune system, from illness or medication
- Neuromuscular disorders that interfere with breathing or the discharge of mucus

### **How can I protect myself against influenza?**

Getting vaccinated is the best way to avoid influenza.

### **How does the seasonal influenza vaccine work?**

The flu shot is made from killed or weakened parts of three or four strains of the influenza virus (the ones most likely to cause influenza this year). It takes about two weeks for protection to develop. Until then, you're still at risk of getting influenza. That's why it's better to get vaccinated before influenza season really gets under way.

### **How safe is the influenza vaccine?**

Influenza vaccines have been monitored and evaluated for safety for decades. Like any medical product, flu vaccines can cause mild side effects, but serious reactions are extremely rare. By contrast, influenza and its complications kill between 3,000 and 49,000 Americans annually.

**Where can I get a flu shot?**

You can get your yearly flu vaccine from your family doctor or primary care provider. In addition, many pharmacies now offer seasonal influenza vaccine for adults. People 50 and older who do not have regular doctors or health insurance coverage can get seasonal flu vaccination at low cost or no cost through the Health Department immunization clinic, community health centers and New York City public hospitals. Call 311 or visit [nyc.gov/flu](http://nyc.gov/flu) to find locations offering vaccine services or for additional information on seasonal influenza.

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