



NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Early Childhood Health and Wellness



# Influenza

## What is influenza?

Influenza, often called “the flu”, is a contagious disease that infects the nose, throat and sometimes lungs.

Influenza is quickly spread to others because:

- People can spread influenza viruses before they know they are ill and after they feel better.
- The time between exposure and getting the infection is short, usually 2-3 days.
- Influenza viruses survive for up to 48 hours in the environment, infecting others who touch objects that have virus on them.

Influenza is more serious than the common cold, and most people with the flu feel very ill. They often have fever, body aches, chills, cough, tiredness, and sometimes have nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Children, especially those younger than 2 years, and those with chronic health conditions are particularly at risk for complications of influenza that often require hospitalization. Complications, however, can occur in any young child including those with no prior health conditions. These complications include:

- Pneumonia
- Difficulty breathing
- Severe muscle inflammation (including the heart muscle)
- Seizures
- Encephalitis (brain infection)
- Changes in mental status (eg, confusion, disorientation, loss of alertness)
- Sepsis
- Death



Influenza is most often seasonal, occurring in the fall and winter months. Rarely, a new influenza virus causes a global pandemic. This handout concerns only seasonal influenza.

## How Head Start Programs Can Address Influenza

Head Start programs should take steps to prevent seasonal influenza for many reasons:

- Influenza is a serious illness that puts children and staff at risk for serious complications and hospitalization.
- Influenza often causes caregivers to miss work.
- Children with influenza miss valuable learning time.
- Children can spread influenza in the community.
- Family resources are strained when parents are unable to work.

### Prevention

By far, the best way to prevent influenza is seasonal vaccination. Children older than 6 months can be immunized against influenza. All children older than 6 months and their caregivers should receive flu vaccine every year, preferably before the end of October.

Children who receive the flu vaccine are significantly less likely to require hospitalization from flu complications than those do not get vaccinated. The flu vaccine also dramatically reduces a child's risk of death from influenza.

Head Start staff should receive a flu vaccine so that they can avoid missing work and infecting others in the community, but also to protect those children in their centers who are unable to receive a flu vaccine—infants who are younger than 6 months. Parents, other caregivers and family members of young infants should be immunized against influenza to protect young infants.

### Infection Control

In a setting with young children, infection control is not easy because of close contact, developmentally appropriate behaviors such as mouthing toys and eating with hands, and young children's lack of ability to contain and control their nasal and oral secretions. Here's how staff can help:

1. Wash hands regularly for 20 seconds using good hand washing technique. Washing with soap and water is best.
2. Assist children with handwashing. Wash infants' hands at the sink using soap and water. Assist other children with washing, ensuring they do so correctly. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not preferred.



3. Prevent contact with nasal secretions and saliva as much as possible. Teach children and staff to cover their noses and mouths when sneezing or coughing with a disposable facial tissue, if possible, or with an upper sleeve or elbow if no facial tissue is available in time. Teach everyone to remove any mucus on skin or other surfaces and perform hand hygiene after using facial tissues. Change or cover clothing with mucus on it.
4. Throw away facial tissues after each use.
5. Wash hands after touching any items that contain mucus or saliva.

## Hand Washing Technique

Washing your hands is easy, and it is one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of germs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the following five steps:

1. **Wet.** Wet your child's hands.
2. **Lather.** Apply clean bar soap or liquid soap to the hands. If using bar soap, place the bar on a rack where it can drain before the next handwashing.

3. **Scrub.** Rub the hands together vigorously. Scrub every surface completely including the backs of hands, between fingers, and under nails. Keep rubbing and scrubbing for 20 seconds to effectively remove the germs.
4. **Rinse.** Rinse the hands completely.
5. **Dry.** Dry hands using a clean towel or allow them to air dry.

Be sure to comply with routine disinfection and cleaning protocols as outlined in Appendix K of *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards*.

## Exclusion and Readmission

Typically, a child with a fever, cough, or runny nose likely does not have the flu, but has another type of common virus, even during flu season. It is not feasible for health care workers to test all children who might have influenza. Deciding which child to exclude from care is based on symptoms plus the behavior of the child.

If a child has a fever and requires more care than staff are able to provide (such as needing to be held all the time) or is unable to participate in activities, then excluding the child is appropriate. During flu season, a child who has been excluded from care because of suspected influenza should remain excluded until 24 hours after he or she is fever free without fever reducing medication. Children are more likely to spread influenza viruses when they have a fever.

Although helpful, exclusion alone is not an effective method of preventing the spread of influenza because influenza virus is present before symptoms occur. This is why immunization is so important.



## Tips for Working with Families

To encourage and facilitate seasonal flu vaccination, consider the following steps:

1. **Educate families** about the seriousness of influenza and the easy ways to receive a vaccination. Ideally, influenza vaccines should be provided by a child's doctor, in the medical home. However, flu vaccines are available in other places, if necessary. The CDC provides a [flu vaccine finder](#) – entering a zip code locates the nearest place to obtain a flu vaccine.
2. **Host a flu clinic** at your program for staff, children and families. Many immunization providers can assist in setting up this kind of clinic onsite.
3. **Track influenza immunization rates.** Sending reminders and checking in with families can increase immunizations rates, which decreases the spread of influenza in your center.

## For Your Family Newsletter

Tailor the messages below to include in your family newsletter.

**Flu can be dangerous for children.** Each year between 6,000 and 26,000 children younger than 5 years are hospitalized because of influenza. The flu vaccine is safe and helps protect children from flu and its complications.

**Everyone should get a flu vaccine.** Anyone older than 6 months should get a flu vaccine to avoid the flu and to avoid spreading the flu to babies who are not old enough to be vaccinated.

**Pregnant women should be vaccinated.** Because flu vaccines cannot be given to infants younger than 6 months, if you are pregnant you can protect your unborn child by getting a flu shot. You pass on protection that lasts for several months after your baby is born.

**Flu vaccine is safe.** Flu vaccine has been used for decades in millions of children. Flu vaccine does not cause the flu. Some people think children can get the flu from the vaccine because some children may still get the flu even if they are vaccinated. This is possible particularly if they don't receive two doses or if it is not given long enough before a child is exposed to someone with the flu.



**Flu vaccine can prevent flu, reduce hospitalizations from flu, and reduce the risk of death.** Many children can avoid getting flu because of the vaccine. Also, the risk of that a child with flu needs to be hospitalized is reduced by 76% in those who received a flu vaccine. The risk of death from flu is reduced by at least half in those children who received a flu vaccine.

**No cost or low-cost flu vaccines are available at your local health department.** Get your flu vaccine before the end of October. [Consider providing specific contact information for the nearest health department vaccine clinics.]

## Resources

### Resources Available on ECLKC

[Why It's Important to Get an Influenza Vaccine Every Year](#) (for talking with families)

[Get Ready for Seasonal and Pandemic Flu: Strategies for Head Start and Child Care](#) (webinar and links to other influenza resources)

### Other Resources

[Influenza Prevention and Control](#)

[The Flu: A Guide for Parents](#)

[Protect Against Flu: Caregivers of Infants and Young Children](#)



## NATIONAL CENTER ON Early Childhood Health and Wellness

View other topics in the Embracing Health and Wellness Series on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/article/embracing-health-wellness-series>

**Our Goal:** To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within the areas of medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

**Contact Us:** The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback as well as your suggestions for topics for future resources! Please forward your comments to: [health@ecetta.info](mailto:health@ecetta.info) or call us at 888-227-5125.

***School readiness begins with health!***