

## Increasing Influenza Vaccination of Health Care Workers

**?** **Why is it so important that nurses and other health care workers get vaccinated with the influenza vaccine?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 5% to 20% of people in the United States acquire influenza each season. Each year more than 200,000 people are hospitalized with influenza complications, and 36,000 die from the disease. The influenza season typically runs from November to March and can begin as early as October and end as late as May.

### RATE OF VACCINATION

According to the CDC, 43% of nurses and other health care workers providing direct patient care received the influenza vaccine in the 2004–2005 season. This number is typical of the dismal rate of vaccination for this group, despite the fact that the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices ranks health care workers as a priority group again this influenza season. It's critical that nurses and other health care workers are well informed to make the decision to get the annual influenza vaccination.

### WHY GET VACCINATED?

When nurses or other health care workers receive the flu vaccine, they not only protect themselves, but also their patients, coworkers, and own families from getting influenza. A health care worker with asymptomatic or

symptomatic influenza can pass it on to their at-risk patients.

### VACCINES

Two types of influenza vaccine are currently available for administration. One type is administered by injection and is a trivalent inactivated influenza vaccine (TIV). The other type is administered as a nasal spray and is a live, attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV).

LAIV contains a weakened influenza virus that does not cause severe symptoms associated with influenza illness. It's approved for administration to nonpregnant healthy persons ages five to 49 years, including most health care personnel.

TIV is an inactivated vaccine containing killed virus, incapable of causing the recipient to get influenza from the vaccine.

Both forms of vaccine may cause adverse effects. As with any medication, a vaccine could possibly cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions, but the risk of a vaccine causing serious harm or death is low. If you have any specific concerns about the vaccines, be sure to consult your health care provider before receiving one.

### WHEN TO GET VACCINATED

Because it can take about two weeks after receiving the influenza vaccine to develop immunity, it's best to get vaccinated as early in the influenza season as the vaccine is available. The ideal time to get influenza vaccine is October or November. The influenza season usually peaks in February, but it can peak any time from November through May. So getting

### Resource

Additional information is available at [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu) and [www.nursingworld.org](http://www.nursingworld.org).

the vaccine in December or later still can be beneficial.

### ANNUAL VACCINATION

Influenza viruses change from year to year, and influenza can strike repeatedly during a lifetime. The immunity that is built up from having influenza from one strain of the virus doesn't protect against newer viruses. More than 200 strains of the virus that causes influenza exist. In addition, immunity to the disease declines over time and may be too low to provide protection after one year.

### STAY HEALTHY: STOP THE SPREAD

Serious respiratory illnesses like influenza are spread by coughing or sneezing and unclean hands. To help stop the transmission of the virus, use good respiratory etiquette. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Sneeze into the inner elbow area of your sleeve if you do not have a tissue. If you cough or sneeze into your hands, clean them. Wash them often with soap and warm water for 15 to 20 seconds. If water is not available, alcohol-based gel sanitizers may be used. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth, where viruses can enter your system. Get plenty of rest, be physically active, eat nutritious foods, and drink plenty of liquids to help stay healthy during the influenza and cold season.

If you do get sick, stay home and check with your health care provider when needed. ▼

*Nancy L. Hughes is director of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at the ANA.*