

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infectious disease caused by various types of influenza virus. In Hong Kong, the two subtypes of influenza A virus, H1N1 and H3N2, are most commonly seen. Influenza occurs in Hong Kong throughout the year with seasonal peaks most commonly in February and March, sometimes July and August. The virus mainly spreads by respiratory droplets. The disease is characterised by fever, sore throat, cough, headache, muscle aches, runny nose and general tiredness. It is usually self-limiting with recovery in two to seven days. However, it can be a serious illness to the weak and frail, such as elderly persons, and may be complicated by bronchitis, pneumonia or even death in the most serious cases.

Why is influenza vaccination important?

Influenza occurs in Hong Kong throughout the year. Influenza causes significant disease burden in some population groups where it is associated with increased risk of complications. Influenza vaccination is important because it is one of the effective means in preventing influenza and its complications.

Who should receive influenza vaccination?

In 2007-2008, the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases recommends the following target groups for influenza vaccination in Hong Kong:

- Elderly persons living in residential care homes
- Long-stay residents of institutions for the disabled
- Elderly persons aged 65 years or above
- Persons with chronic illnesses*
- Health care workers
- Poultry workers
- Children aged 6 to 23 months
- All pregnant women

* People with chronic illnesses mainly refer to those who have chronic cardiovascular, pulmonary, metabolic or renal diseases, persons who are immunocompromised, or children and adolescents (aged 6 months to 18 years) on long-term aspirin therapy.

What is the recommended influenza vaccine composition?

The viral-strain composition recommended by the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases in 2007-2008 (northern hemisphere winter) contains the following:

- A/Solomon Islands/3/2006(H1N1)-like virus
- A/Wisconsin/67/2005(H3N2)-like virus
- B/Malaysia/2506/2004-like virus

Who should not receive influenza vaccination?

People who are allergic to eggs, neomycin, a previous dose of influenza vaccine or other vaccine components are not suitable to have the influenza vaccination. Those with bleeding disorders or on warfarin may receive the vaccine by deep subcutaneous injection. Individuals who suffer from an acute febrile illness on the day of vaccination may receive the vaccine when they recover. The vaccine can be given on the same day as other types of vaccines.

As it is unknown whether influenza vaccination is causally associated with increased risk of recurrent Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), precaution should also be made to ascertain the temporal relationship if there is history of GBS. History of GBS is a contraindication for further use of inactivated influenza vaccine if it has developed within 8 weeks after receiving inactivated influenza vaccine.

Can pregnant women receive influenza vaccination?

Influenza vaccination with inactivated influenza vaccine in pregnancy is considered safe by the World Health Organization and there is no evidence indicating that inactivated influenza vaccine is teratogenic even if given during the first trimester.

What are the possible side effects of the vaccine?

Influenza vaccine is usually well tolerated apart from occasional soreness at the injection site. The recipient may experience fever, muscle and joint pains, and tiredness beginning 6 to 12 hours after vaccination and lasting up to two days. Immediate severe allergic reactions like hives, swelling of the lips or tongue, and difficulties in breathing are rare and require emergency consultation. If fever persists despite taking paracetamol, or there are other symptoms or reactions, please consult a doctor.

Does the vaccine work right away?

No. It takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection against influenza virus infection.

How long will the protection from the vaccine last?

The vaccine currently in use helps to reduce the chance of influenza and its complications, but it does not offer 100% protection. The immunity built up in the vaccinated person will decline over time and may be too low to provide protection after one year. Vaccinated persons may still develop influenza, especially when the circulating influenza viruses differ significantly from the vaccine strains. For prevention against influenza, vaccinated individuals still need to maintain good personal and environmental hygiene practices, balanced diet, regular exercise, adequate rest, and avoid smoking.

Should I need to get vaccinated for influenza every year?

Yes. New subtype variants appear from time to time and at irregular intervals. This is responsible for seasonal outbreaks and implies:

- (1) The immunity built up from having influenza caused by one virus strain does not always provide protection when a new strain is circulating.
- (2) Immunity to the disease declines over time and may be too low to provide protection after one year.

How to get further information?

For more information on influenza and influenza vaccination, members of the public may visit the Centre for Health Protection website www.chp.gov.hk or contact the 24-Hour Health Education Hotline of the Department of Health 2833 0111. The public can consult a doctor for influenza vaccination.

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給你多一分保護

(2007-2008)

Protect yourself from Influenza
Influenza vaccination helps