

IMMUNIZING YOUNG CHILDREN AGAINST FLU IS THE BEST PROTECTION

By Dr. Sheela Basrur, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health

By now, Ontarians have become very familiar with the free flu shot program. The flu shot is available to individuals aged 6 months or older who live, work or attend school in Ontario. Evidence suggests that our youngest population — infants and children aged six to 23 months — should get the flu shot.

The most serious strains of the flu — influenza A — can infect up to 40 per cent of children in this age group every year. Symptoms may include vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain. Some infants may exhibit feeding changes, irritability and lethargy.

Last year, the *National Advisory Committee on Immunization*, a group of medical experts and scientists from across Canada who study the trends and effects of the flu, placed healthy children, aged six to 23 months, on the list of high-risk groups who should get a flu shot. That's because young children are more severely affected by the flu and may have increased risk of being hospitalized due to influenza-related complications.

Research indicates that rates of hospitalization for those under two years of age are higher than that of healthy, older children and young adults.

Children are major spreaders of influenza infection to others, especially within households, and each year in Ontario, thousands of kids fall ill with the flu. Looking after children with the flu impacts everyone — parents will lose days of work to stay home and care for sick children.

One of the most common ways to reduce the spread of the flu virus is basic hygiene, such as handwashing and reminding young children to cover their mouths when they cough or sneeze. Parents should lead by example and teach their children how to prevent disease transmission.

The following are some common myths about getting a flu shot:

I don't need the flu shot because I got one last year.

The flu shot is needed every year. The strains change yearly, and each year a new vaccine is produced to offer protection against the more common strains of the virus that are circulating at that time.

Getting a flu shot will give me the flu.

This is simply not true. The flu shot contains no live virus and is designed to fight specific flu viruses. The flu shot will not protect you against a cold or other respiratory infections.

The flu is just a bad cold.

A cold is not the flu. Cold symptoms and complications from colds are much milder than those from the flu.

Protect your children — and yourself this flu season. Get the flu shot.