

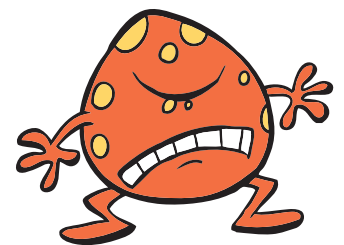
## HEALTH CARE WORKERS

# Questions and answers about the flu and the flu vaccine



Symptoms linked to the flu virus and its complications (including hospitalization and death) may vary depending on personal characteristics (such as age and state of health) and the particular strains circulating each year. As health care workers here are answers to questions you may have regarding the flu and its vaccine.

**THERE IS A VACCINE TO PROTECT THOSE WHO ARE AT A HEIGHTENED RISK OF ASSOCIATED FLU COMPLICATIONS.**



### What are the signs of the flu?

The flu is an illness that can be serious and potentially fatal. It is characterized by sudden fever, dry cough, muscle pain and significant general malaise that lasts five to seven days. The cough may last up to two weeks while fatigue can last for several days, sometimes more.

Complications can also present themselves following a flu, such as earaches, sinusitis and pneumonia. For some of those who are more vulnerable, the flu can lead to inability to go about their work for several days, hospitalization and even death.

**To understand the difference between the flu and a cold, consult the MSSS health and wellness portal**

[quebec.ca/sante/problemes-de-sante](http://quebec.ca/sante/problemes-de-sante)

## Which people are at heightened risk of complications?

The flu is a severe viral infection that spreads easily from person to person. This contagious illness is present in your workplace. If you are in good health, you may successfully fight the flu when in contact with it. Unfortunately, you can transmit the virus and contaminate all those around you and clients at your workplace.

All around you there are those at a heightened risk of complications:

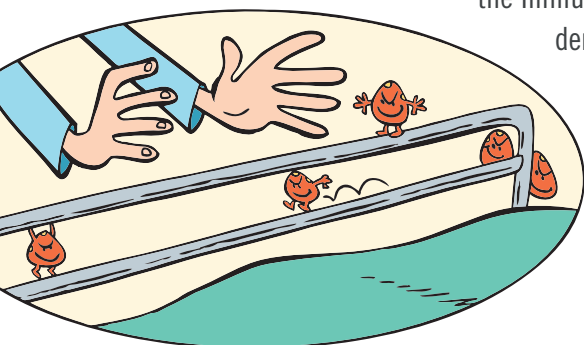
- People of any age who suffer from certain chronic illnesses (cardiac or respiratory problems, diabetes, cancer, immune deficiency, transplant patients, etc.)
- Residents of all ages in long term care facilities
- People aged 75 or older

A large number of the clients in health institutions are part of these high-risk groups.



## As a health care worker, should I get vaccinated for flu?

Experts recommend that all health care workers should be vaccinated. A health care worker in terms of vaccination against flu, can be defined as any person who provides care or who comes into close contact with those at high risk, as defined by the Immunisation Protocol of Quebec (PIQ), whether in a hospital, a CHSLD, a medical or dental clinic, a CLSC or in another living or care environment. In any case, vaccine availability should prioritize health care workers who provide direct patient care in hospitals and CHSLDs.



**For further information on the definition of a health care worker, consult the PIQ**

[msss.gouv.qc.ca](http://msss.gouv.qc.ca)

## Why not simply vaccinate everyone?

Even if 100% of vulnerable people were vaccinated, the vaccine will protect, at best, 50% of them. The effectiveness of the vaccine depends on several factors: the age of the person vaccinated, the state of their immune system and how closely matched the strains currently circulating are to those contained in the vaccine. For patients with a high risk for complications, the flu vaccine will at least lower the risks of hospitalization or death.

Because some people have medical contraindications for the vaccination, and others don't receive the information or recommendation to be vaccinated, it is hard to foresee the possibility of vaccinating everyone at risk.

Vaccination of health care workers against the flu is still recommended, particularly for those who have frequent, close contact with those at a higher risk of complications. In this way, on a priority basis, the vaccination should be aimed at health care workers providing direct care to patients in hospitals and CHSLDs.

Scientific proof of the indirect impact of health worker vaccination on the reduction of illness and mortality on the part of patients is of poor quality. In any case, it is still likely that such vaccination prevents transmission among patients and facilitates the management of flu outbreaks by reducing the number of cases.



## Can I still get the flu after being vaccinated?

The flu vaccine can't transmit the flu. In Québec, the different flu vaccines offered to adults contain no living virus. They are comprised of samples of the dead virus that allow the immune system to produce protective antibodies against the virus.

Numerous other viruses can create flu-like symptoms (FLS). In this way, during respiratory virus season, it is possible to catch something other than flu, a cold for example, or another virus not contained in the vaccine. These other respiratory viruses are more common than the flu virus, particularly among children.

Age Group	% of flu among those hospitalized with FLS
0-17 years old	28 %
18-64 years old	43 %
65-74 years old	40 %
75 years old or greater	41 %

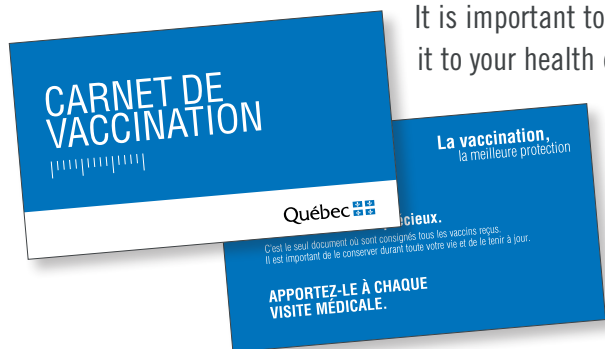
The table below shows Québec data on the percentage of flu among persons hospitalized with FLS during the peak flu season from 2011-2012 up to 2016-2017. This percentage can increase by more than 50% during a particularly intense flu season. As well, since the vaccine is less effective than desired, it is still possible to contract the flu.



## Where can I get the flu vaccination?

Employees in the health care sector benefit from free flu vaccinations, often at the workplace. Check with your health department to obtain further details. On the other hand, nothing prevents you from being vaccinated at your CLSC.

It is important to record this information in your vaccination booklet and to communicate it to your health department to ensure that your vaccination record file is updated.



## Are there side effects from the vaccine?

The flu vaccine is safe. On the other hand, it is possible to experience some side effects.

FREQUENCY	POSSIBLE REACTIONS TO THE VACCINE	WHAT TO DO
<b>In the majority of cases</b> (more than 50% of people)	Pain at the injection site	
<b>Very often</b> (less than 50% of people)	Redness, swelling at the injection site // Muscle pain, joint pain, headache, fatigue // Loss of appetite, drowsiness (feeling a need to sleep), irritability	Apply a damp, cold compress at the injection site
<b>Often</b> (less than 10% of people)	Bruise or itching at the injection site // Fever, chills and discomfort, particularly among those receiving the vaccine for the first time // Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach ache // Red eyes, sore throat, cough, difficulty breathing: called the oculo-respiratory syndrome (ORS)	Take anti fever/discomfort medication as required
<b>Sometimes</b> (less than 1% of people)	Facial swelling: this reaction can be part of ORS // Skin redness // Dizziness // Swollen lymph nodes	Consult a doctor depending on the severity of the symptoms.
<b>Rarely</b> (fewer than 1 person in a thousand)	Convulsions // Numbness, neuralgia (pain along a nerve pathway)	

It is possible that there may be a very slight risk of developing Guillain-Barré Syndrome after a flu vaccination. The risk would be about one case per million vaccinated adults. This syndrome causes progressive but reversible paralysis but it can sometimes have permanent effects. Its cause is unknown. The majority of cases arise after an intestinal or respiratory infection, including the flu, especially among young adults and the elderly.

## Should I be vaccinated every year?

Almost every year a new composition of the flu vaccine is produced in order to provide the best possible protection against the virus that will be in circulation. In Québec, the injectable vaccine offered to adults is made up of three strains of the virus most likely to be found in the northern hemisphere, as determined by the World Health Organization. As a result, the vaccine offered this year may differ from last year's.

For these reasons, it is recommended that people at elevated risk of complications and health care workers, especially those who provide patient care, be vaccinated against the flu every year, regardless of their vaccination status in the previous year.

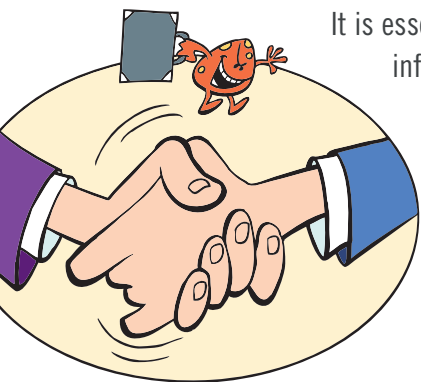
Worries about the potential negative effects of repeated vaccination (e.g. every year) may raise questions about whether it is worthwhile to vaccinate those with only a slight risk of complications, such as health care workers. However, these side effects are not seen every year. In balancing the benefits and the risks linked to vaccination, it is important to take into account the possibility of reducing the spread of flu to those at higher risk for complications by health care workers who have been vaccinated.



## What are the other means of reducing the spread of flu or any other respiratory infection to higher risk individuals?

It is essential to apply infection control and prevention measures (ICP) as they relate to respiratory infection in our institutions. These measures consist mainly of the following:

- Don't go in to work if you have symptoms of flu or any other respiratory infection
- Reinforce basic practices such as hand hygiene and wearing a mask when in direct contact with patients who present symptoms resembling a respiratory infection
- Be sure to follow all preventative measures against infection recommended by the organization.



### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Consult the Infection control program or Health department of your organization. Visit the ASSTSAS website ([asstsas.qc.ca](http://asstsas.qc.ca)) and the MSSS health and wellness portal ([sante.gouv.qc.ca](http://sante.gouv.qc.ca))

**This technical bulletin was designed in conjunction with the assistant Directorate-General for public health protection of the MSSS and the National Public Health Institute of Quebec (INSPQ).**