

FLU SEASON: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Influenza, better known as the flu, is a contagious disease that is usually transmitted by sneezing, coughing and close contact. The symptoms of the flu are often a sudden fever, muscle aches, fatigue and headaches. Complications that can occur with the flu are dehydration, sinusitis or bacterial pneumonia.



Protecting people with ALS against the flu

People with ALS often encounter various difficulties seeing as their swallowing and respiratory muscles have weakened. Because of this they have decreased drainage of saliva, they have trouble coughing and can't quite get rid of secretions, such as mucus. So it's very important to prevent people with ALS from catching a respiratory infection, and especially the flu.

If you're in contact with an ALS patient or someone who has an increased risk of complications with the flu, it's a wise decision to get vaccinated. That way you prevent the virus getting passed on.

What's also incredibly important in order to avoid the flu is good hygiene. Regularly wash your hands with soap and warm water. When that isn't possible, use a disinfecting hand gel instead. Try to touch your face and nose as little as possible and do the same when it comes to rubbing your eyes. Avoid places where there are a lot of people and postpone a visit to family or friends who have already been infected with a cold or the flu. That way you'll be less at risk.

Keep your vaccination status up-to-date

The American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an organization that traces, treats and prevents diseases, advises to get a flu shot every year. After all, the influenza virus changes with time and the flu vaccine is developed to protect us from three or four viruses that are supposedly the cause of the disease in that current year. After the vaccine, our body needs two weeks to create antibodies that fight the flu.

Flu shots are refunded by most health insurances and are often immediately available at the doctor's office, ALS clinics, health services and apothecaries. People who wish to get vaccinated better do so by October before the peak of flu season.

The risks and advantages of the vaccine

Some people have the feeling that vaccines can cause harm to their health. Risks and advantages have to be considered for every individual separately, and each person has the right to choose what's best for them. For people who suffer from ALS it's advised to discuss their state of health with their neurologist or primary physician.

The vaccine is available in two ways: as an injection made from a non-activated virus, and as a nose spray made from a living but weakened virus. Common side effects of the injection are light pain on the spot of the injection, headache and fatigue. The nose spray can be tricky for ALS patients seeing as sprays can possibly cause trouble because of the weakened swallowing muscles, thickened secretions and nasal blockage. The injection is a possibly less stressful and safer option for people with ALS.