

Fact Sheet

News from the IBD Help Center

INFLUENZA

Otherwise known as the flu, influenza is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses which can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Some people, including older people, young children, and individuals with certain health conditions such as inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD), are at high risk for serious complications from the flu. This risk is increased for patients who are treated with immunosuppressive therapies. You can learn more about these groups, including frequently asked questions about the flu here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/acip/summary/summary-recommendations.htm>

Flu viruses primarily spread through close contact (i.e. coughing or sneezing) with individuals who already have the flu. People also may become infected by touching something—such as a surface or object—with the flu virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose. That's why practicing good hygiene and cleaning of surfaces is important to help ward off the flu and other illnesses.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year. In Guidelines for Immunizations in Patients with Inflammatory Bowel Disease, it is recommended that children and adults with IBD receive a yearly flu vaccine before flu season, prior to October. Current guidelines recommend inactivated vaccines (organisms have been killed or inactivated with heat or chemicals) and therefore the injectable flu vaccine and not the inhaled formulation should be used in patients who are immunosuppressed (1)(2).

The seasonal flu vaccine will protect patients against the common strains of influenza virus. Patients on steroids, immunosuppressant therapies (such as azathioprine, 6-mercaptopurine, or methotrexate), and biologic therapies (such as infliximab, adalimumab, certolizumab pegol, vedolizumab, ustekinumab, or natalizumab) should discuss the risks and benefits of the vaccine with their doctor.

It is important to ask your gastroenterologist, primary care physician, or other health care provider whether you or your child with IBD should be vaccinated against the flu, as well as discuss its risks versus its benefits. The vaccine does not entirely prevent you from getting the flu, but in most cases will likely be less severe.

The CDC encourages the public to take the following three steps to fight the flu:

- **Get vaccinated against the flu virus before October.** The CDC recommends a yearly seasonal flu vaccine as the most important step in protecting against the flu.
- **Take everyday preventive actions.** Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze; wash hands frequently with soap and water; avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth; and try to avoid close contact with sick people.

- **Take flu antiviral drugs if your doctor recommends them.** If you get seasonal flu, antiviral drugs can treat the flu. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) that fight against the flu by keeping the viruses from reproducing in your body.

Flu and COVID-19

Flu vaccination can help reduce the overall impact of respiratory illnesses on the population and therefore can lessen the resulting burden on the healthcare system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information regarding special considerations for Flu vaccine and COVID-19, visit:

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/season/faq-flu-season-2020-2021.htm>

The Foundation offers important resources for those with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis: information, guidance, support, and the latest clinical and scientific information in the field. Learn more about the Foundation at www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org. You can join your local chapter, connect with others living with these diseases, and get involved. Most of all, know that we're here for you whenever you need us. You can reach us at our IBD Help Center at 888.MY.GUT.PAIN (888-694-8872) or info@crohnscolitisfoundation.org.

Reference:

1. Sands BE; Cuffari C, Katz J, Kugathasan S, Onken J, Vitek C, Orenstein W. Guidelines for Immunizations in Patients with Inflammatory Bowel Disease. *Inflamm Bowel Dis*. Vol 10, num 5, Sept 2004
2. ACG Clinical Guideline: Preventive Care in Inflammatory Bowel Disease. *Am J Gastroenterol*. 2017 Feb;112(2):241-258.

Additional Information Sources:

Melmed Gil. Vaccination Strategies for Patients with Inflammatory Bowel Disease on Immunomodulators and Biologics. *Inflamm Bowel Dis* Vol 15 num 9, Sept 2009

Ying Lu, Jacobson Denise, Bousvaros Athos. Immunizations in Patients with Inflammatory Bowel Disease. *Inflamm Bowel Dis* Vol 15 num 9, Sept 2009

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August 2020