Seasonal influenza, or flu, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses and typically occurs during the late fall through early spring. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Influenza viruses cause disease among all age groups. Some people, such as older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious flu complications. Annual influenza vaccination (in the fall) is the best way to prevent this illness.

**Cold or Flu?**
The flu and the common cold, both respiratory illnesses (but caused by different viruses), have similar flu-like symptoms making it difficult to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. Colds are usually milder than the flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations.

**Preventing the Flu: Vaccination**
The single best way to prevent the flu is for individuals to get a flu vaccine each fall before seasonal increases in influenza virus. Vaccination of health-care personnel and other persons in close contact with persons at increased risk for severe influenza illness can also reduce transmission of influenza and subsequent influenza-related complications. Vaccination is associated with reductions in influenza-related respiratory illness and physician visits among all age groups, hospitalization and death among persons at high risk, ear infections among children, and work absenteeism among adults.

There are two types of vaccines that protect against the flu. The "flu shot" is an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The regular seasonal flu shot is injected into muscle—usually in the upper arm. It is approved for use in people 6 months of age and older, including healthy people, people with chronic medical conditions and pregnant women. A hi-dose vaccine for people 65 and older (also intramuscular) was first made available during the 2010-2011 season. An intradermal vaccine (injected with a needle into the "dermis" or skin ) for people 18-64 years of age is being made available for the first time for the 2011-2012 season. The *nasal-spray flu vaccine* (sometimes referred to as LAIV for Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine) contains...
both attenuated (weakened) live viruses, and is administered by nasal sprayer and is only approved for use among healthy people between the ages of 2 and 49 years who are not pregnant.

Both flu vaccines (the flu shot and the nasal-spray flu vaccine [LAIV]) work in the same way; they cause antibodies to develop in the body, and these antibodies provide protection against influenza virus infection. It is recommended to get vaccinated (to protect against influenza) each year because a person's immunity (natural protection that develops against a disease after a person has had that disease) after influenza vaccination declines over the year and may be too low to provide protection after one year. Also, flu viruses change from year to year, so a vaccine made against flu viruses circulating last year may not protect against the newer viruses. This is why the influenza vaccine is updated to include current viruses every year.

When to Get Vaccinated Against Seasonal Flu
Yearly flu vaccination should begin in September, or as soon as vaccine is available, and continue throughout the flu season which can last as late as May. This is because the timing and duration of flu seasons vary. While flu season can begin early as October, most of the time seasonal flu activity peaks in January or later.

Preventing the Flu: Healthy Habits
Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too. Stay home when you are sick, if possible. You will help prevent others from catching your illness.

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.

Clean your hands: Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth: Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

Practice other good health habits: Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food.

Several visual alerts are available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for use in outpatient health-care facilities, such as dental offices. These instruct patients and visitors to inform health-care personnel if they are experiencing any symptoms of a respiratory infection and to practice respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.

“Cover your Cough” posters can be downloaded from the CDC Web site by visiting: www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/covercough.htm.

A notice for patients to report flu symptoms, emphasizing covering coughs and sneezes and hand hygiene is available by visiting: www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/infectioncontrol/resphygiene.htm.

Preventing the Flu: Medications
Antiviral drugs used for chemoprophylaxis or treatment of influenza are an adjunct to the vaccine for controlling and preventing the flu. These medications are not a substitute for vaccination. Effectiveness depends on application early in the course of the disease. When started within the first two days of symptoms, they can reduce the duration of flu by about one day. These are prescription medications, and a physician should be consulted before they are used.

Who Should Get a Flu Shot (Influenza Vaccine)?
(If you have questions about whether you should get a flu vaccine, consult your health-care provider.)

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommend that annual vaccination be administered to all persons aged ≥ 6 months. Previously, recommendations for seasonal influenza vaccination focused on vaccination of higher risk persons, children 6
months through 18 years of age and close contacts of higher risk persons. A "universal" vaccination recommendation for all persons aged ≥ 6 months eliminates the need to determine whether each person has an indication for vaccination and emphasizes the importance of preventing influenza among persons of all ages. The expansion of recommendations for annual vaccination to include all adults is supported by evidence that influenza vaccines are safe and effective.

Who Should Not Get a Flu Shot (Influenza Vaccine)
(If you have questions about whether you should get a flu vaccine, consult your health-care provider.)

Some people should not be vaccinated or should wait before getting vaccinated. They include:
- persons who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- persons who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past.
- persons who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine previously.
- children younger than 6 months of age.
- persons who have a moderate or severe illness with a fever. (These people can get vaccinated once their symptoms lessen.)

The most up-to-date “Flu” information from the CDC is available by visiting www.cdc.gov/flu.

References: