

Avian Influenza A (H5N1) Vaccine

Public Health – Fact Sheet

Immunization is one of the most important accomplishments in public health. Immunizations help in eliminating and controlling the spread of infections and diseases. Vaccines help your immune system to recognize and fight bacteria and viruses that cause disease.

What is Avian Influenza?

Avian influenza, sometimes called ‘avian flu’ or ‘bird flu’, is a type of Influenza A virus which easily spreads from bird to bird. While mostly affecting birds like chickens and geese, it can affect other animals such as foxes and dairy cows. Most avian influenza viruses typically cause little or no signs of illness in infected birds. However, some can cause severe illness and death in birds known as highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI).

HPAI transmission to humans can happen when the virus is in the air (in droplets or possibly dust) and a person breathes it in, or when a person touches something that has the virus on it and then touches their mouth, eyes or nose. The symptoms of avian influenza in humans can resemble those of human influenza. This could include fever, cough, aching muscles, headache, sore throat, diarrhea, stomach pain, vomiting and eye irritation. In severe cases, shortness of breath, serious lung infections (e.g., pneumonia) and seizures may occur. In rare cases, this could lead to death.

What is the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) Vaccine?

Health Canada approved the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine for use in people six months of age and older. It contains proteins of a strain of HPAI that is closely related to the strain that is spreading in North America. There are no direct clinical trials or real-world evidence that shows how well this vaccine works or how long any protection lasts. But it is expected to help your body create antibodies against the H5N1 virus based on studies of similar H5N1 vaccines, which may provide protection for six months or longer.

The vaccine is given as a two-dose vaccine series. The second dose should be given at least three weeks after the first dose. It is also recommended to wait six weeks between a dose of Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine and any other vaccines so any possible side-effects from the vaccine can be accurately reported, unless the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine or another vaccine is needed more urgently.

Who can get the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine?

The Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine may be offered to those at highest risk of ongoing (i.e., routine and repeated) contact to animals with confirmed or suspected H5N1 infection. To view the eligibility criteria for this vaccine, please visit Manitoba's Avian Influenza website at manitoba.ca/health/publichealth/environmentalhealth/avian.html

Who should NOT get the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine?

The following individuals should not receive the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine:

- children under six months of age
- anyone who has had a severe allergic reaction to a previous dose of any flu vaccine
- anyone who has a severe allergic reaction to any ingredient of the vaccine
- anyone who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within six weeks after receiving any flu vaccine

There is no available clinical data for the use of this vaccine in pregnant or breastfeeding/chestfeeding people. Those with a weakened immune system may have a decreased immune response to the vaccine.

Anyone with high fever should postpone immunization until recovered. The vaccine can still be given if the illness is mild, like a cold.

What are the possible side-effects of the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine?

Clinical trials of similar H5N1 vaccines show they are usually well tolerated. Common side effects include soreness, redness or swelling where the vaccine was given, fever, muscle aches, headache, tiredness, or joint pain. These trials were small and would not have been able to detect rare side effects. Based on previous experience with a similar vaccine used during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, there may be an increased risk of developing the following rare side effects:

- Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS): Approximately 1 additional case per 500,000 doses. Symptoms may include tingling in the arms or legs and muscle weakness.
- Narcolepsy: Approximately 1 additional case per 1,000,000 doses. Symptoms may include excessive daytime sleepiness and sudden episodes of muscle weakness.

A severe allergic reaction is a serious but very rare side-effect of getting the vaccine. Symptoms could include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat and face. It is important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine so you can be monitored. If symptoms occur after leaving the clinic, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department for immediate attention.

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Report any serious or unexpected side-effects to a health care provider.

Your record of protection

All immunizations are recorded in a person's immunization record in Manitoba's Immunization Registry.

This registry enables:

- your health care provider to find out which immunizations you or your child(ren) have received,
- the production of immunization records or notification to you about overdue vaccines,
- public health officials to monitor how well vaccines work in preventing disease.

For information on how to obtain a copy of your immunization record, visit manitoba.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/div/records.html

The Personal Health Information Act protects your information and/or that of your child(ren). You can have your personal health information and/or that of your child(ren) hidden from view from health care providers. For more information, please refer to: manitoba.ca/health/publichealth/surveillance/phims.html

For more information on Avian Influenza and the Avian Influenza A (H5N1) vaccine, you can:

- talk to your health care provider; or
- call Health Links – Info Santé in Winnipeg at 204-788-8200; toll free elsewhere in Manitoba 1-888-315-9257; or
- visit Manitoba's Avian Influenza Website: manitoba.ca/health/publichealth/environmentalhealth/avian.html