

## **Influenza or the “Flu”**

Flu or influenza is characterized by the abrupt onset of fever, headache, muscle aches, sore throat and cough. Unlike other common respiratory illnesses, flu can be severely debilitating for a number of days resulting in inability to work or carry on with normal activities. Since flu is caused by a virus, general antibiotics cannot shorten the length or severity of illness but flu vaccine can help to prevent it.

**Flu vaccine** - Flu vaccine consists of parts of three different strains of influenza virus that were in circulation the previous season. The vaccine has very few side effects, and a single injection in adults offers protection from flu for about one year. A new flu shot would have to be obtained the following winter to maintain protection.

**Who should take the flu vaccine?** - Since the vaccine is considered safe, and has minimal side effects, anyone who would like to minimize their chances of having flu in the winter should consider getting the vaccine. The attack rate is high among travelers, who often are more vulnerable due to the stress of travel and congestion of many forms of public transport and restaurants. The vaccine is particularly recommended to those over age 50 and all persons with a chronic illness such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma or chronic lung problems. The vaccine causes antibodies to reach their full protective levels within two weeks. It is safe and effective for children over 6 months of age. Because children’s immune systems are not as developed as adults, previously unimmunized children under age 9 should receive two injections a month apart to achieve full protection.

The months of peak risk in Nepal seem to be December, January and February and there usually is a smaller peak in the summer. The vaccine is considered safe to use at any stage of pregnancy, but pregnant women should talk to a doctor or nurse at the clinic before deciding to take the vaccine. Anyone with a severe allergy to eggs (sudden itching, swelling or difficulty breathing after eating eggs) should not take the flu vaccine, as it contains a small amount of egg products.

**Flu vaccine made each year is not protective against the bird flu but helps to prevent the more common kinds of flu strains circulating in humans.**