

Influenza FactSheet

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What is “The Flu”?

Influenza (the flu) is a contagious disease that is caused by the influenza virus. It attacks the respiratory tract in humans (nose, throat, and lungs). The flu is different from a cold and it usually comes on suddenly and may include the following symptoms:

- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness (can be extreme)
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Nasal congestion
- Body aches

These symptoms are usually referred to as “flu-like symptoms”.

What You Should Do If You Get the Flu

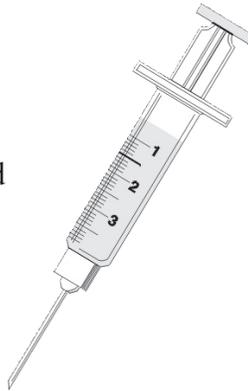
- Rest
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Avoid using alcohol and tobacco
- Take medication to relieve the symptoms of flu.

A virus causes influenza, so antibiotics (like penicillin) don’t work to cure it. The best way to prevent the flu is to get an influenza vaccine (flu shot) each fall, before flu season.

Who Can Get Sick?

Anyone can get the flu, but the disease is more severe in some people.

Most people who get the flu will recover in 1 to 2 weeks, but some people will develop life-threatening complications (such as pneumonia) as a result of the flu. Millions of people in the United States - about 10% to 20% of U.S. residents - will get the flu each year. An average of about 20,000 people per year will die from this disease (mostly among the elderly) and 114,000 per year have to be admitted to the hospital as a result of getting influenza. The flu may be a VERY SERIOUS illness, however, because it is so common it is often treated with a degree of apathy.



People 65 years old, or older, people of any age with chronic medical conditions, and very young children are more likely to get complications from flu. Pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections are four examples of complications from flu. The flu can make chronic health problems far worse. The “flu season” in the United States is usually from November through April each year. During this time, flu viruses are circulating in the population.

Who Should Get a Flu Shot?

People at high risk for complications of the flu and people in close contact with them (including household members) should get the vaccine.

Who Should NOT Get a Flu Shot?

Talk with a doctor before getting a flu shot if you:

- 1) Have ever had a severe allergic reaction to eggs or to a previous flu shot, or;
- 2) Have a history of Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS).

If you are sick with a fever when you go to get your flu shot, you should talk to your doctor or nurse about getting your shot at a later date. However, you can get a flu shot at the same time you have a respiratory illness without fever or if you have another mild illness.

Why Get a Flu Shot and Why Do I Need a New One Every Year?

An annual flu shot is the best way to reduce the chances that you will get the flu. The flu is a serious disease, and people of any age can get the flu. Flu viruses change from year to year, which means two things. First, you can get the flu more than once during your lifetime. The immunity (natural protection that develops against a disease after a person has had that disease) that is built up from having the flu caused by one virus strain doesn’t always hold up when a new strain is circulating. Second, a vaccine made against one flu virus may not protect against the newer viruses. That is why the flu vaccine is updated to include

the current viruses every year. A third reason why you should get a flu shot every year is that after you get a flu shot, your immunity to the flu declines over time and may be too low to provide protection after 1 year.

When Should You Get A Flu Shot?

Beginning each September, flu shots should be offered to persons at high risk. The best time to get a flu shot, if you are in a high risk group, is from September through November. You should avoid getting a flu shot too early, because protection from flu can begin to decline within a few months after getting the shot. Flu activity in the United States generally peaks between late December and early March. You can still benefit from getting a flu shot after November, even if flu is present in your community. Vaccine should continue to be offered to unvaccinated persons throughout the flu season as long as vaccine is still available. Once you get a flu shot, your body makes protective antibodies in about 2 weeks.

Does a Flu Shot Work Right Away?

No. It takes about 2 weeks after the shot for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection against influenza virus infection. In the meantime, you are still at risk of getting the flu. That's why it's better to get your flu shot early in the fall, before the flu season really gets under way.

How is the Influenza Virus Passed Around?

The flu is spread, or transmitted, when a person who has the flu coughs, sneezes, or speaks and sends flu virus into the air, and other people inhale the virus. The virus enters the nose, throat, or lungs of a person and begins to multiply, causing symptoms of the flu. Flu may, less often, be spread when a person touches a surface that has flu viruses on it - a door handle, for instance - and then touches his or her nose or mouth.

The Myth of the "Stomach Flu"

Many people use the term "stomach flu" to describe illnesses with nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea that are not caused by the flu virus, but can be caused by many different viruses, bacteria, or even parasites. However, while vomiting, diarrhea, and being "sick to your

stomach" can sometimes be related to the flu - particularly in children - these problems are rarely the main symptoms of influenza. The flu is a respiratory disease and not a stomach or intestinal disease.

Do Not Give Aspirin To a Child or Teenager Who Has the Flu

Never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms - and particularly fever - without first speaking to your doctor. Giving aspirin to children and teenagers who have influenza can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome. Children or teenagers with the flu should get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids, and take medicines that contain no aspirin (consider giving Tylenol, Advil, or similar aspirin-free products) to relieve symptoms.

The Flu is Contagious

A person can spread the flu starting one day before they feel sick. Adults can continue to pass the flu virus to others for another 3-7 days after symptoms start. Children can pass the virus for longer than 7 days. Symptoms start 1-4 days after the virus enters the body. Some persons can be infected with the flu virus but have no symptoms. During this time, those persons can still spread the virus to others.

How To Know if You Have the Flu

Your respiratory illness might be the flu if you have sudden onset of body aches, fever, and respiratory symptoms, and your illness occurs during November through April (the usual flu season in the Northern Hemisphere). However, during this time, other respiratory illnesses can cause similar symptoms and flu can be caught at any time of the year. It is impossible to tell for sure if you have the flu based on symptoms alone. Doctors can perform tests to see if you have the flu if you are in the first few days of your illness.

Other Myths About the Flu

<i>“Flu is merely a nuisance.”</i>	Wrong. Flu is a major cause of illness and death in the United States and leads to an average of about 20,000 deaths and 114,000 hospitalizations per year.
<i>“Flu shots cause the flu.”</i>	Wrong. The licensed flu vaccine used in the United States, which is made from inactivated or killed flu viruses, cannot cause the flu and does not cause flu illness.
<i>“Flu shots don’t work.”</i>	Not exactly. When the killed viruses in the vaccine and circulating viruses are similar, the flu shot is very effective. There are several reasons why people think flu shots don’t work. People who have gotten a flu shot may then get sick from a different virus that causes respiratory illness but is mistaken for flu; the flu shot only prevents illness caused by the influenza virus. In addition, protection from the vaccine is not 100%. Studies of healthy young adults have shown flu vaccine to be 70% to 90% effective in preventing the flu. In the elderly and those with certain long-term medical conditions, the flu shot is often less effective in preventing illness. However, in the elderly, flu vaccine is very effective in reducing hospitalizations and death from flu-related causes.
<i>“There is no need to get a flu shot every year.”</i>	Wrong. The flu viruses are constantly changing. Generally, new influenza virus strains circulate every flu season, so the vaccine is changed each year.

This fact sheet was produced in cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control and the The Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers’ Compensation. We recommend consulting with your primary health-care provider if you have questions or need medical assistance. Remember to practice safety, don’t learn it by accident.