

Influenza Prevention

What are the signs and symptoms of the flu?

Seasonal flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. For most people, it is not a serious health threat. However, for the elderly or those who have a chronic health problem, influenza can result in serious complications, such as pneumonia. In rare cases, it can be fatal.

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:

- Fever
- Chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue

Although these are similar to those caused by cold viruses, flu symptoms tend to be more severe and last longer. Abdominal cramps, vomiting or diarrhea symptoms are normally symptoms of stomach or intestinal flu, not influenza.

How does the flu spread?

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with the flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. A person might also get the flu by touching a surface or object that has the flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or nose.

How long is a person with the flu contagious?

You may be able to pass the flu on to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time.

How can you prevent the flu?

Flu vaccines, while not always effective in preventing the illness, do reduce the severity of the symptoms and protect against complications that could develop. The shots are strongly recommended for persons 65 years of age or older and those who suffer from

such chronic health problems as heart disease, respiratory problems, renal disease, diabetes, anemia or any disease that weakens the body's immune system. Be sure to check with your physician before getting the shot if you have any medical conditions.

Aside from getting vaccinated, you can also take everyday measures to prevent getting the flu by following these steps:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you are sick with flu-like illness, stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.)
- While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.

Is there treatment if you get sick with the flu?

Yes. If you get sick, there are drugs that can treat flu illness. They are called antiviral drugs and they can make your illness milder and help you feel better faster. They can also prevent serious flu-related complications, like pneumonia.

Bed rest, a mild pain reliever and lots of fluids are the best treatment. Antibiotics are not effective against flu viruses.

Because the influenza vaccine is only effective for one year and viruses vary from year to year, it is necessary to get a flu shot every year. The flu season usually begins in November and lasts until around the middle of April. If you plan to get a flu shot, do so early since it takes about two weeks to develop full immunity. However, even a shot in January may protect you against a late winter outbreak.