

How to Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones Against Seasonal Flu, Avian Flu (Bird Flu) or Any Cough Illness

What is the flu?

Influenza, known as flu, is a very contagious disease of the respiratory (breathing) system. The flu is caused by a virus that is easily passed from one person to another by coughing and sneezing. For most people, the flu makes them feel very sick, but they generally get better in about a week. However, young children, people older than 65 years of age, pregnant women and people with chronic medical conditions can have serious complications from the flu. These complications can include pneumonia and worsening of medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, or asthma.

The following tips can help protect you and your loved ones during the regular flu season, as well as from the threat of bird flu or any other cough illness.

Get flu vaccine every year.

The best way to prevent the flu is to get flu vaccine every year. There are 2 flu vaccines:

- The "flu shot" is an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. **The flu shot** is for everyone 6 months of age and older, including pregnant women and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine, called FluMist, is made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu. **FluMist** is for healthy people 5 to 49 years old who are not pregnant.

The flu vaccine that you get every year does not protect you against bird flu.

Ask your health care provider if you should get pneumococcal vaccine.

You need one dose of pneumococcal vaccine (pneumonia shot) if you have a medical condition like diabetes, heart or lung disease, or a weak immune system, or if you are 65 years of age or older.

Wash your hands.

Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze.

Cough or sneeze into a tissue or the inside of your elbow. Throw tissues away and wash your hands.

Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth. This decreases the chance that you will get the flu virus or other germs into your body, or that you will pass the flu to others .

Clean things that are touched often. Clean things that are touched often, such as door or refrigerator handles, computer key boards/mouse, phones and water faucets.

Avoid contact with people who are sick. Avoid unnecessary holding, kissing or sharing food, dishes and glasses with anyone who has a cold or the flu. People with young children, weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid large crowds, if possible.

Avoid contact with birds when visiting countries that have bird flu.

For more information about travel to countries that have bird flu, visit the CDC travel website at www.cdc.gov/travel/other/avian_f1u/.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health recommends that you do **not** keep supplies of antiviral medications, such as Tamiflu®, at home.

For more information about influenza visit www.mass.gov/dph/flu, or call the MDPH Immunization Program at **617-983-6800** or **888-658-2850**