

FactSheet

Influenza (The Flu)

What is the flu?

The flu is a very contagious infection caused by the influenza virus. Most healthy people recover from the flu without complications. However, people over 65, young children, pregnant women, as well as people with chronic medical conditions may be at risk for serious complications from the flu.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Symptoms of the flu include fever, headache, tiredness, cough, sore throat, congestion, runny or stuffy nose, and body aches. Vomiting and diarrhea can occur but are more common in children.

Can the flu be dangerous?

Yes. Some complications caused by the flu are pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, and diabetes.

How is the flu spread?

When a person with the flu coughs or sneezes, droplets containing the influenza virus are sprayed into the air. The droplets can be inhaled by people nearby and they will likely be infected. Occasionally a person may become infected by touching something (door knob, faucets, etc.) with influenza virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose. Symptoms usually appear one to three days after a person has been exposed to the virus.

Are there different strains/types of the influenza virus?

There are two major groups of the influenza virus, A and B. The influenza virus is named for the location where it was first isolated. For example, A/Hong Kong is a group A virus that was first isolated in Hong Kong. The genes of flu viruses change frequently and new strains of the virus appear every year requiring a new flu vaccine every year.

How can the flu be prevented?

The single best method of preventing the flu is to get a flu vaccination each fall. In addition, these health habits are always a good practice and they can help prevent spreading the flu:

- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. If you are not near water, use an alcohol based hand cleaner.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.
- If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from catching your illness.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth because germs can spread this way.

How safe is the vaccine?

Getting the flu is much riskier than getting the influenza vaccine. The current influenza vaccines

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are safe and generally have only mild side effects. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. The risk of influenza vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small.

- The injectable vaccine is made with inactivated (dead) viruses and it cannot cause the flu.

Who should not be vaccinated?

People who cannot get a flu shot:

- Children younger than 6 months old
- People who had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past
- People with severe, life-threatening allergies to the vaccine or any of its ingredients. Note: there are certain flu shots that have different age indications. For example people younger than 65 years of age should not get the high-dose flu shot and people who are younger than 18 or older than 64 should not get the intradermal flu shot.

People who should talk to their doctor before getting the flu shot:

- People who have an allergy to eggs or other vaccine ingredients
- People who have ever had Guillain-Barré syndrome
- People who are feeling ill

Can I get the flu even though I got vaccinated this year?

Yes. The ability of flu vaccine to protect a person depends on two things: 1) the age and health status of the person getting the vaccine and 2) the similarity or “match” between the virus strains in the vaccine and those in circulation.

What to do if you get the flu:

- There are four prescription antiviral medications approved for treatment of the flu. The treatment must be started within two days of illness to be effective, so seek medical care early on. Antibiotics are not effective against the flu virus.

- Get plenty of rest, drink a lot of fluids and avoid using alcohol and tobacco.
- Over the counter medications may relieve the symptoms of the flu. Never give aspirin to children or teenagers with flu-like symptoms, particularly fever, because it has been associated with a dangerous illness called Reye’s syndrome

There is no scientific evidence that any herbal, homeopathic or other folk remedies have any benefit against the flu.

Emergency warning signs that require urgent medical attention include:

In children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

In adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting



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