



Influenza

General Public Fact Sheet

Influenza is a highly contagious viral infection that affects mainly the nose, throat, chest and lungs. The flu may cause mild to severe illness, and may even lead to death. In the very young, the elderly, and those with other serious medical conditions, infection can lead to severe complications such as pneumonia.

Symptoms of influenza

Symptoms of influenza include:

- Fever (typically $\geq 100^{\circ}$ F)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Stomach symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can occur but are more common in children than adults

Emergency warning signs of influenza

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- 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
- Fever with a rash

Infectious period

People may be able to infect each other 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 with flu viruses for an even longer time.

The spread of influenza

Flu viruses mainly spread from person to person through coughing or sneezing. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five days

after becoming sick. That means that you may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

How can you prevent the flu?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each year.

- The “flu” shot- an inactivated vaccine (containing killed influenza virus) that is injected. The flu shot is approved for use in people six months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- An alternative to the inactivated vaccine is a recombinant vaccine (made without influenza virus) that is approved for people aged 18 and older.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses.

If you get the flu:

- Stay home from work or school
- Make sure and get plenty of rest and water
- Over-the-counter medications may relieve symptoms
- Consult your doctor

Why you should get the flu vaccine every year

The influenza virus changes every year as it makes its way around the world. Since the exact flu viruses are almost never the same from year to year, the strains of influenza in the vaccine changes each year. This is why you need to get a new flu vaccine every year. The vaccine only protects you from influenza for one year.

Vaccination

Yearly flu vaccination should begin as soon as the vaccine is available, usually early in the fall. This will provide protection for the entire flu season.

Who should get vaccinated

Yearly flu vaccination is recommended for almost everyone over 6 months of age, and is especially important for those people at high risk for developing flu-related complications, such as children younger than five, adults 65 years of age and older, pregnant women, and people with certain medical conditions like heart and lung problems, or diabetes.

Antiviral medications

Influenza antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (oral, inhaled and intravenous) that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. Antiviral drugs can make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. This could be especially important for people at high risk. These medications are only effective if started within 48 hours after symptoms start. Influenza antiviral medication may also be used to prevent sickness in people who have been exposed to someone with influenza.

What should I do to protect myself and my family from the flu?

- **Washing your hands** often with soap and water for at least 15-20 seconds. Wash your hands before and after eating, going to the bathroom, touching pets, phones, or keyboards.
- **Use hand sanitizer.** If you cannot wash your hands, alcohol-based hand cleaner may be used if your hands do not look dirty.
- **Stay home** from work or school when you are ill, and encourage others to do the same.
- **Stay away from others you know are ill.** You are less likely to become ill if you stay at least three feet away from someone who is coughing or sneezing.
- **Vaccination.** The first line of defense against influenza is to get your influenza vaccination each year.
- **Contact your health care provider.** If you experience flu-like symptoms contact your physician. Your physician may be able to prescribe antiviral medications for you to shorten the duration of the illness and prevent transmission.
- **Clean frequently and appropriately.** Some viruses can live up to two hours on some surfaces. Frequently clean commonly used surfaces, such as door handles, handrails, eating surfaces, toys, and phones. Commercial disinfectants or bleach solutions should be used. The bleach solution can be made by mixing $\frac{1}{4}$ cup bleach with 1 gallon of water. The bleach solution must be made fresh daily.

Contact information:

The Center for Acute Disease Epidemiology
321 E 12th St
Des Moines, IA 50319
(800) 362-2736