

What is influenza?

Influenza, also called the flu, is a highly contagious viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs that is one of the most severe illnesses of the winter season. Influenza is spread easily from person to person, primarily when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Influenza may lead to hospitalization or even death, especially among the elderly. About 10 to 20 percent of the population contract influenza annually.



Do I have the flu?

Influenza is often confused with other illnesses. It is important to correctly identify the condition before treatment is begun. The information provided here will help you determine if what you have is really influenza. However, only a physician or other qualified health professional can diagnose illnesses.

Influenza is different from a cold. The following table will help you distinguish between the flu and a cold.

Note that the flu does not cause nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. What people sometimes call the "stomach flu" is not really flu at all. It is most likely due to food poisoning, or a bacterial or non-influenza viral infection inside the gastrointestinal tract.

Also note that the severity of an individual case of influenza can range from very mild to very severe, including complications.

Symptom	Influenza	Cold
Onset of symptoms	Sudden onset	Gradual onset
Fever	High, often with chills	None or mild
Headache	Severe	None or mild
Muscle and body aches	Severe	None or mild
Fatigue, weakness	Severe	None or mild
Nasal congestion, sneezing	None	Present
Cough	Severe dry cough	None or mild
Sore throat	Possible	Present
Duration	4-7 days; fatigue and weakness can last 2-3 weeks	2-4 days; congestion can last 5-7 days
Possible complications	Bronchitis, pneumonia, sometimes death	Sinus infection; earache

What if I get the flu?

If you develop the flu:

- Contact your physician
- Stay in bed
- Minimize contact with others to keep from spreading the flu
- Get as much rest as possible.

You can be contagious for 3 – 7 days after you start feeling sick, so take time off from work or other social activities while recovering. Drink plenty of clear liquids and use over-the-counter pain medicines like acetaminophen, aspirin, or ibuprofen) for fever and body aches as suggested by your physician.

When should I contact the doctor?

As soon as you think you have the flu, contact your doctor. Older adults and persons with chronic illnesses are especially vulnerable to complications from influenza. There are four prescription medications available that can decrease the severity and duration of an influenza illness, but only if started within 24 – 48 hours of onset of the illness. Two of the medications, amantadine (Symmetrel) and rimantadine (Flumadine), are older medicines that are effective only against influenza A virus. The two newer medicines, zanamivir (Relenza) and oseltamivir (Tamiflu) are effective against both influenza A and influenza B viruses and tend to have fewer side effects than the older medicines.



When you contact your doctor, he or she will decide whether one of these medicines would be appropriate in your case, and choose the medicine that would be best for you.



Also, seek medical attention promptly in the following situations:

- Your fever or cough worsens
- You are coughing up blood or thick, foul-smelling mucus
- You have chest pain or shortness of breath
- You develop an earache.

Who should get influenza vaccine?

- People 50 years of age or older
- Healthcare workers and others in contact with people in high-risk groups
- People with chronic disorders of the lungs or heart
- People whose immune system is weakened because of HIV/AIDS or other immune system diseases, long-term steroid therapy, and cancer treatment with x-rays or drugs
- Residents of long-term care facilities
- People who have required regular medical follow-up or hospitalization during the preceding year because of chronic illnesses including diabetes mellitus, kidney diseases, and blood cell diseases such as sickle cell anemia.

Those who are allergic to eggs or Thimerosal (mercury) should **NOT** receive the vaccine.

How do I prevent the flu?

The vaccine to protect against influenza is usually given in the fall (September through December) so that protection lasts for the entire flu "season" (December through March). Because the influenza virus changes from year to year, it is important to get vaccinated with a new flu vaccine every year. Influenza immunizations are recommended for all adults age 50 and over, as well as persons with chronic diseases.



Simple hand washing is also helpful in reducing the spread of germs that transmit the flu. Wash

your hands frequently before a meal, after using the bathroom, and when in a heavily populated public area. Lather with soap and water for approximately 10-15 seconds with warm water. If you cannot wash your hands immediately, use alcohol or hand sanitizers and avoid touching your face.

Facts about influenza for adults

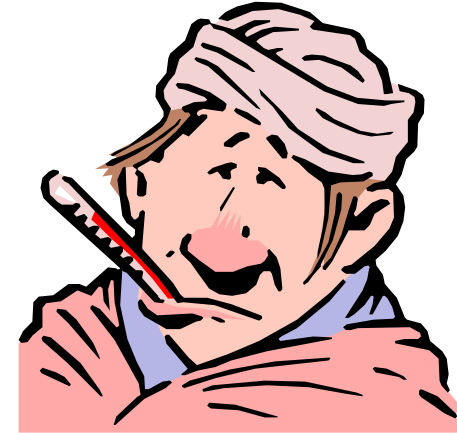
- Pneumonia and influenza together are the sixth leading cause of death in the United States and the fifth leading cause of death among older adults.
- Since influenza viruses can change from year to year, an annual influenza shot is necessary each fall.
- Influenza vaccine will not protect you from other respiratory infections such as colds and bronchitis, commonly called the flu.
- Influenza can be prevented with a safe, effective vaccine.
- You cannot get influenza from the vaccine.
- Influenza vaccine is fully paid for by Medicare Part B.
- Your local health department provides immunization programs. Check with them to see when and where upcoming flu vaccine programs will be held in your area.

Sources: National Coalition for Adult Immunization at www.immunizeseniors.org and National Foundation for Infectious Diseases at www.nfid.org

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FACTS ABOUT INFLUENZA FOR ADULTS



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