

INFLUENZA

INFLUENZA VIRUSES

Influenza (also known as the flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by flu viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times lead to death. The flu is different from the common cold. The flu usually comes on suddenly and may include these symptoms:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Stomach symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can also occur; but are more common in children than adults

These symptoms are usually referred to as "flu-like symptoms."

ANYONE CAN GET THE FLU

Most people who get influenza will recover in a few days to less than 2 weeks, but some people could develop life-threatening complications, such as pneumonia, as a result of the flu. About 5% to 20% of U.S. residents (millions of people) will get influenza each year. An average of about 36,000 people per year in the United States die from influenza, and more than 200,000 are admitted to the hospital. Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people), and serious problems from influenza can happen at any age. People age 65 years and older, people of any age with chronic medical conditions, and very young children are more likely to experience complications from influenza. Pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections are three examples of complications from the flu. The flu can make chronic health problems worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks, and people with chronic congestive heart failure may an exacerbation of this condition that is triggered by the flu.

THE FLU SEASON

In the Northern hemisphere, winter is typically the peak-time for the flu season. In the United States, the flu season can range from October to as late as May. During the past 24 flu seasons, months with the heaviest flu activity occurred in December, January and February.

HOW THE VIRUS SPREADS

The influenza viruses are typically spread from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze from an infected person are propelled (usually less than 3 feet) through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby. Influenza viruses may also be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object, and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

THE FLU IS CONTAGIOUS

Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 days after becoming sick. Children may pass the virus for longer than seven days. Symptoms start one to four days after the virus enters the body. **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.** Some persons can be infected with the flu virus but have no symptoms. During this time, those persons can still spread the virus to others.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET THE FLU

Your respiratory illness might be the flu if you have sudden onset of body aches, high fever, and respiratory symptoms, and your illness occurs during the usual flu season. However, during this time, other respiratory illnesses can cause similar symptoms to the flu. In addition, influenza can also occur outside of the typical flu season. It is impossible to tell for sure if you have the flu based on symptoms alone. Doctors normally perform tests to determine if you have the flu--if you are in the first few days of your illness. If you get the flu, you should:

- Rest
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Avoid using alcohol and tobacco
- Take medication to relieve the symptoms of flu

Influenza is caused by a virus, so antibiotics (like penicillin) do not work against influenza. However, bacterial infections can occur at the same time or follow an influenza infection. The best way to prevent the flu is to get an influenza vaccine each year, before the flu season. October or November is the best time to get vaccinated, but getting vaccinated in December or even later can still be beneficial since most influenza activity occurs in January or later.

DON'T GIVE ASPIRIN TO A CHILD OR TEENAGER WHO HAS THE FLU

Never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms – and particularly fever – without first speaking to your doctor. Giving aspirin to children and teenagers who have influenza can be associated with a rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome. Children or teenagers with the flu should get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids, and take medicines that contain no aspirin to relieve symptoms.

THE "STOMACH FLU" MYTH

Many people use the term "stomach flu" to describe illnesses with nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. These symptoms can be caused by many different viruses, bacteria or even parasites. While vomiting, diarrhea, and being nauseous or "sick to your stomach" can sometimes be related to the flu – particularly in children, these problems are rarely the main symptoms of influenza. The flu is a respiratory disease and not a stomach or intestinal disease.