

Influenza Fact Sheet

Influenza is a viral infection of the lungs and airways that is also known as “the flu”

Anyone can get influenza. Influenza is spread from person to person through the air by coughing and sneezing. It is also spread by direct contact with infected people. Influenza can be a serious disease that causes severe complications such as pneumonia. It can also make heart disease or chronic lung disease worse. Thousands of deaths each year are caused by influenza.

Symptoms of influenza might be confused with the common cold

Influenza and the common cold both have symptoms that affect the throat and nose, but influenza symptoms are usually more severe than cold symptoms. These symptoms include a stuffy or runny nose, sore throat, and cough. Other symptoms of influenza affect the whole body, such as headache, tiredness, body aches, fever, and chills. Symptoms of influenza usually start 1 to 3 days after coming into contact with an individual who is ill with influenza. Most persons feel better after several days but cough and tiredness may last two weeks or more. Stomach cramps and diarrhea are not typical symptoms of influenza.

There are ways to treat influenza

For the quickest recovery from influenza, get plenty of rest; drink fluids like juice, water, or hot tea; and take an aspirin substitute for muscle aches and fever (but **never** give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms – and particularly fever – without first speaking to your doctor.). **Do not** give any medication including over-the-counter remedies to a child without first consulting with your pediatrician. If a fever lasts more than 3 or 4 days, see a doctor. A doctor can also prescribe certain antiviral medications. These medications may make symptoms milder if taken within 1 to 2 days of when symptoms begin.

Look Out for Emergency Warning Signs

There are some “emergency warning signs” that require urgent medical attention.

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

- High or prolonged fever
- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Changes in mental status, such as not waking up or not interacting; being so irritable that the child does not want to be held; or seizures
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions (for example, heart or lung disease, diabetes)

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

- High or prolonged fever
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Near-fainting or fainting
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Seek medical care immediately, either by calling your doctor or going to an emergency room, if you or someone you know is experiencing any of the signs described above or other unusually severe symptoms. When you arrive, tell the receptionist or nurse about your symptoms. You may be asked to wear a mask and/or sit in a separate area to protect others from getting sick.

Yearly vaccination is the most important way to prevent influenza

People at higher risk of complications should get the influenza vaccine each year. The best time to get the influenza vaccine is between October and mid-November. It may also be given in September or after mid-November. It takes about 2 weeks after vaccination to develop protection against the influenza virus. Past infection with influenza or immunization with the influenza vaccine does not protect a person from getting influenza the next year.

People who should receive influenza vaccination include:

- Anyone 50 years of age or older
- Anyone with a weakened immune system
- Anyone 6 months to 18 years of age who takes chronic aspirin therapy
- Anyone with a serious long-term health problem such as heart disease, lung disease, or kidney disease
- Anyone living in a nursing home, assisted living facility, or rehabilitation facility
- Pregnant women in the 2nd and 3rd trimester
- Anyone coming in close contact with people at risk of complications (for example, health care workers or family members)

Influenza vaccine may rarely cause serious side effects in some people

The viruses in the vaccine are killed, so you cannot get influenza from the vaccine. People with severe allergic reactions to eggs or to a previous dose of influenza vaccine, and people with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome should talk to their doctor before getting vaccinated.

There are steps you can take to prevent spreading influenza to others:

- Wash hands often, especially after coughing, sneezing, and wiping or blowing the nose.
- Cover mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Use paper tissues when wiping or blowing the nose; throw tissues away after each use.
- Stay away from crowded living and sleeping spaces, if possible.
- Stay home and avoid contact with other people to protect them from catching your illness.
- Certain antiviral medications may prevent illness.