

FACTS ABOUT the FLU

What is the flu?

Influenza (commonly called “the flu”) is an illness caused by viruses that attack the nose, throat, and lungs. The illness can range from mild to severe, and may even have life threatening complications. Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people), and serious problems from influenza can happen at any age. The flu is easily spread from one person to another by coughing and sneezing. Symptoms start one to four days after the virus enters the body. Studies show that adults are contagious from one day before developing symptoms to up to seven days after getting sick. Children may share the virus for more than seven days after they show signs of sickness.

How is the flu diagnosed and treated?

The flu usually starts very suddenly, with fever (from 102° – 104°) lasting three to four days, headache, severe muscle aches, and general weakness/extreme fatigue. There may also be dry cough, sore throat, and a runny or stuffy nose. Gastro-intestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, are much more common among children than adults. The only way to be sure that an illness is the flu is to have a test by a doctor within the first two or three days after the sickness begins.

Antibiotics don't cure illnesses caused by viruses. Four antiviral drugs (amantadine, rimantadine, zanamavir and oseltamivir) have been approved for treatment of the flu. All of these must be prescribed by a doctor and must be started within the first two days of the illness.

Those people who are at special risk from complications of the flu should consult their health care provider when flu symptoms begin. This includes people 65 years or older, people with chronic medical conditions, women who are pregnant, and children. The doctor may prescribe antiviral drugs as treatment and will check for signs of other infections that can be complications of the flu.

In addition to the medications noted above, treatment for the flu includes resting in bed, drinking lots of non-alcoholic fluids, and staying home and away from others until the symptoms go away (usually five to seven days). If necessary, non-aspirin pain relievers such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (e.g. Advil®, Motrin®, etc.) can be used for fever or muscle aches. Children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin because it can cause a rare but serious disease called Reye Syndrome.

It is important to see a health care provider or go to an emergency room for any of these symptoms:

- Severe or prolonged flu symptoms (more than seven to ten days)
- Rapid or labored breathing, pain or difficulty breathing, or bluish skin
- Near-fainting or fainting
- Not drinking enough fluids or having severe or persistent vomiting
- Cough with yellow sputum or phlegm
- Confusion
- Becoming sick again with fever and/or a worse cough after flu symptoms have improved
- Worsening of underlying medical conditions (for example, heart or lung disease, and diabetes)

In addition, parents should seek medical attention for infants and children who have:

- Changes in mental status, such as not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Seizures

Can the flu be prevented?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get the flu vaccine. Vaccines are updated each year with current strains, so it is important to get the vaccine annually, usually in October or November.

There are other ways to protect against the flu. These include:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water, especially after being near anyone with a cold or the flu.
- Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing. Turn your head (never cough in the direction of someone else) and cough or sneeze into a tissue or cough or sneeze into the inside of your elbow.
- Avoid taking young children, those with immune system problems, or the chronically ill into crowds during flu season.
- Avoid close contact (such as hugging and kissing) with anyone who has a cold or the flu.
- Stay home from work or school and other activities if you have symptoms of the flu.
- Do not share items that can spread germs and viruses, like drinking cups or other items that you put in your mouth.
- Clean surfaces in household, classroom, and child care settings: door or refrigerator handles, phones, water faucets etc.