

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Influenza (Flu)

What You Need to Know

What is Influenza?

Influenza (Flu) is a highly contagious common viral respiratory infection. Three specific influenza virus strains are responsible for illness in humans. Influenza type A and type B viruses cause moderate to severe illness in humans, and type C may cause no symptoms or only a mild respiratory illness. Influenza types A and B viruses circulate almost every winter. Influenza season usually begins in October and continues thru the following May, but tends to peak between November and March. Influenza can occur throughout the year particularly in tropical areas, but in temperate regions like the United States, influenza tends to occur in the fall and winter. In the Southern Hemisphere, influenza generally peaks from April through September. Travelers also can get the flu during the summer, especially when traveling to areas of the world where the flu is active.

Who gets it?

Influenza can occur at any age, but infants and young children are at highest risk of life-threatening consequences. Influenza is commonly misdiagnosed and under-diagnosed. Undiagnosed mild disease in older children, adolescents, and adults contributes to the spread of the illness among infants and young children. Individuals can get Influenza more than once, and vaccine protection fades over time.

How is it spread?

Influenza (flu) viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or possibly their nose.

What are the symptoms?

- Headache
- Abrupt onset of fever or chills
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Cough
- Extreme tiredness
- Sore throat
- Body or muscle aches

Occasionally, intestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain may be present (especially in children), but should not be confused with the “stomach flu.” Influenza is not “stomach flu”, a term used by some to describe illness causing vomiting or diarrhea.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of influenza usually appear one to five days after exposure and generally last from two to five days with a rapid recovery. Cough and decreased strength may linger for two weeks or longer.

When and for how long can it be spread?

The contagious period is 24 hours before and up to 7 days after illness begins.

How do you treat it?

Basic treatment includes bed rest, fluids, and over-the-counter medications for the relief of symptoms such as: a runny nose, cough, sore throat, fever, and body aches. Infants, children, or teenagers should not use aspirin to treat influenza symptoms because of the risk for developing Reye Syndrome, a serious condition associated with the use of aspirin during the course of a viral illness.

Antiviral medications may prevent or reduce the severity and shorten the duration of influenza. Antiviral medications require a prescription, may have side effects and are not appropriate for everyone. There are guidelines governing the age appropriate use of these antivirals in children. Consult your health care provider as to whether or not anti-viral medication is right for you and your family

How serious is the flu?

Flu is unpredictable and how severe it is can vary widely from one season to the next depending on many things, including:

- What flu viruses are spreading,
- How much flu vaccine is available
- When vaccine is available
- How many people get vaccinated, and
- How well the flu vaccine is matched to flu viruses that are causing illness.

Certain people are at greater risk for serious complications if they get the flu. This includes older people, young children, pregnant women and people with certain health conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease).

Complications of flu

Complications of flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

How do you prevent it?

- The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each season. Traditional flu vaccines made to protect against three different flu viruses (called “trivalent” vaccines) are available. In addition, flu vaccines made to protect against four different flu viruses (called “quadrivalent” vaccines) also are available.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water running water after contact with secretions from the nose or mouth
- Cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. Use tissue or your sleeve. Dispose of used tissues.
- Clean and disinfect any surface items like toys, door knobs, refrigerator handle, water faucets, cupboard handles and countertops with a solution of 2 teaspoons of household bleach to 4 cups of water or any product that kills viruses.

When is the influenza vaccine given?

The vaccine should ideally be taken each fall, from October through November. Vaccination may continue into December and throughout the influenza season, even after influenza has come to your community. However, to avoid missed opportunities for vaccination, vaccine should be offered to high-risk persons who are hospitalized or seen at their physician’s office starting in September and continuing through the winter. It takes about one to two weeks after vaccination for antibody against influenza to develop and provide protection.

How safe is influenza vaccine?

The Influenza vaccine does not contain live viruses, so it cannot cause influenza. The most common reaction is soreness where the shot was given. Some persons may have muscle aches, tiredness, and low-grade temperature for one to two days.

Who should get influenza vaccine?

1. Persons who have a greater risk for developing complications from influenza, include:
 - Persons aged 65 years and older
 - Persons living in nursing or other chronic-care facilities
 - Adults and children with chronic heart or lung conditions, including children with asthma
 - Adults and children who are immunosuppressed for any reason, including immunodeficiency (HIV) virus or who are taking certain medications
 - Adults and children who require regular medical follow-up because of chronic metabolic disease (including diabetes mellitus), kidney disease, or blood disorders
 - Children and teenagers, aged six months to 18 years, who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy and might be at risk for developing Reye syndrome after influenza
 - Women who will be in the second or third trimester of pregnancy during the influenza season

- Persons who are aged 50-64 years of age may be at increased risk of developing complications from influenza because of known or unknown underlying medical conditions
2. Persons who can spread influenza to those who are at risk of developing complications from influenza:
- Persons who live with or care for high-risk individuals
 - Out of home caretakers and contacts of children aged 0-23 months
 - Health care workers, physicians, staff and volunteers of health care facilities and home health agencies
 - Public-safety workers such as, police, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians
 - Healthy children six months to 23 months are at increased risk of influenza-related hospitalization, and should be considered for vaccine when feasible
(Consultation with your physician is advised prior to administration of the vaccine).

Vaccine safety has not been established for children less than six months of age and is not recommended.

3. Persons who want the vaccine:
- College and university students and travelers to foreign countries
 - Persons who wish to avoid influenza illness

Who should NOT get influenza vaccine?

Persons having the following conditions should NOT receive the influenza vaccine:

- Persons who have had a severe allergic reaction to one of the influenza vaccine components following a prior dose; such as thimerosal or eggs
- Persons who have had severe reactions, such as hives or swelling of the lips, or tongue, after eating eggs should consult their health care provider before considering the influenza vaccine
- Fever or an active infection
- Persons with a history of Guillain-Barre' Syndrome should consult their health care provider before receiving the influenza vaccine

For more information on Influenza, call (816) 325-7204

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