

# Flu Facts

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## What is the flu?

The flu or influenza is a highly contagious viral infection of the respiratory tract. It usually occurs in epidemics during the colder months.

## What causes the flu?

Flu is spread by breathing in respiratory droplets released when an infected person coughs or sneezes. People can also transfer the virus from hands or objects to their mouth, nose, or eyes.

## How will I know if I have the flu?

Following an incubation period of 24 to 48 hours, flu symptoms begin to appear: a sudden onset of chills; temperature of 101° to 104° F; headache; fatigue; muscle aches (particularly in the back, arms and legs); a dry cough; hoarseness; sore throat; red eyes; runny or stuffy nose.

These symptoms usually subside in 3 to 5 days, but the cough and weakness may persist. Fever is usually higher in children than in adults. In some patients (especially older people), lack of energy and extreme tiredness may persist for several weeks.

Complications include pneumonia, ear and sinus infections. People with asthma, diabetes, and other chronic diseases should get a flu vaccine each fall, because these conditions can worsen if they get the flu.

## What is the treatment for flu?

### The best treatment is prevention!

- ◆ Get a flu vaccine each fall.
- ◆ Ask those who are ill to cover their cough and take care not to spread their secretions.
- ◆ Do the same for others if you become ill.

Home treatment includes:

- ◆ Rest in bed - Stay at home to help prevent spread.
- ◆ Drink plenty of water and uncaffeinated liquids, especially hot ones such as herbal tea with lemon juice and honey. This will soothe your throat, relieve congestion and replace body fluids.



- ◆ Gargle with warm salt water to soothe your throat
- ◆ Suck on hard candies or lozenges.

- ◆ Avoid dairy products, which can thicken mucous secretions, block good drainage and favor bacterial sinus infection.
- ◆ Take acetaminophen (Tylenol) to relieve fever and pain. Don't take aspirin if you are under age 19.
- ◆ Wash your hands frequently to avoid infecting others.
- ◆ Dispose of paper tissues in a garbage can.
- ◆ Cough suppressants may interfere with the productive cough that helps rid your respiratory tract of mucus.
- ◆ Do not smoke or drink alcohol.

## When should I see a health care provider?

Anti-viral medication can be prescribed if flu is diagnosed in the first 48 hours of illness. If you are improving, fever has resolved, and then the fever and productive cough return, seek medical help - it could be pneumonia.

*Individuals with asthma, diabetes, and other chronic conditions who did not get their flu shot this year should call early if flu symptoms begin.*

- ◆ Antibiotics do not affect the flu virus, but are prescribed for secondary *bacterial* infections, such as pneumonia or a sinus infection.
- ◆ Some flu victims benefit from an inhaler to aid breathing.
- ◆ The prescription flu pills amantidine (Symmetrel) and rimantidine (Flumadine) may reduce the duration and severity of symptoms of Influenza type A only and may have side effects. A newer flu pill, Tamiflu, and an anti-flu inhaled drug, zanamivir (Relenza), hit both Influenza A and B, decreasing symptom severity and shortening duration by 1-2 days. Cost is about \$40-60. These must be taken within 2 days of the onset of flu symptoms.
- ◆ Clinicians may order a nasal swab test (\$10-12) to confirm the diagnosis before prescribing these drugs.

- ◆ **Flu pills are not a substitute for the flu shot because they only work as long as they are taken – the shot lasts all season.**

## Flu vaccine – get it every year!

### Who should get the flu shot?

Recommended for all those over 50, nursing home residents, health professionals, those with asthma or other lung, heart, kidney, other chronic disease, diabetes, anemia, weakened immune systems, infants 6- 23 months, travelers, those who are pregnant, and



students and staff at schools and colleges. That's nearly all of us. Check with a doctor first if you have an allergy to eggs.

The nasal-spray flu vaccine (FluMist) is made with live, weakened flu viruses for use in healthy people 5 years to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

### ***Does it have any side effects?***

Mild problems from the flu shot can be a sore arm, fever, fatigue, or muscle aches, lasting 1-2 days. The spray may cause runny nose, cough, sore throat, or headache. The vaccines do not cause the flu.

### ***When will the vaccine start working?***

The vaccines protect 70 to 90% of those who receive them within 2 weeks; the duration of protection is 4 to 6 months.

### ***When and where should I get the flu vaccine?***

The annual flu vaccine works best if taken at least a month before the epidemic starts. The Health Service offers flu shot clinics each fall, usually in October, on a first-come first-served basis. If you are in a high-risk group, you may call 346-4646 for an appointment for the vaccine.

