



INFLUENZA (FLU)

Influenza Viruses

Influenza, also known as the flu, is a contagious disease that is caused by the influenza virus. It attacks the respiratory tract in humans (nose, throat, and lungs). The flu is different from a cold. Influenza usually comes on suddenly and may include these symptoms: usually referred to as "flu-like symptoms."

- Fever, Headache, Fatigue (extreme), Dry Cough, Sore Throat, Nasal Congestion, Body Aches

Anyone Can Get the Flu, But the Disease Is More Severe for Some People

Most people who get influenza will recover in one to two weeks, but some people will develop life-threatening complications (such as pneumonia) as a result of the flu. Millions of people in the United States — about 5% to 20% of U.S. residents — 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 have to be admitted to the hospital as a result of influenza. 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 get complications from influenza. Pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections are three examples of complications from flu. The flu can make chronic health problems worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks while they have the flu, and people with chronic congestive heart failure may have worsening of this condition that is triggered by the flu.

The Flu Season

In the Northern hemisphere, winter is the time for flu. In the United States, the flu season can range from November through March, and even past March in some years. During the past 21 flu seasons, months with the heaviest flu activity (peak months) occurred in December, January, February, and March.

How the Influenza Virus Is Passed Around

The main way that influenza viruses are spread is from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. (This is called "droplet spread.") This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled (generally up to 3 feet) through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby. Though much less frequent, the viruses also can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or object and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

The Flu Is Contagious

A person can spread the flu starting one day before he or she feels sick. Adults can continue to pass the flu virus to others for another three to seven days after symptoms start. Children can pass the virus for longer than seven days. Symptoms start one to four days after the virus enters the body. Some persons can be infected with the flu virus but have no symptoms. During this time, those persons can still spread the virus.

How To Know if You Have the Flu

Your respiratory illness might be the flu if you have sudden onset of body aches, fever, and respiratory symptoms, and your illness occurs during November through April (the usual flu season in the Northern Hemisphere). However, during this time, other respiratory illnesses can cause similar symptoms and flu can be caught at any time of the year. It is impossible to tell for sure if you have the flu based on symptoms alone. Doctors can perform tests to see if you have the flu if you are in the first few days of your illness.

What You Should Do If You Get the Flu

- Rest
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Take medication to relieve the symptoms of flu

Influenza is caused by a virus, **so antibiotics (like penicillin) don't work to cure it.** The best way to prevent the flu is to get an influenza vaccine (flu shot) each fall, before flu season.

Do Not Give Aspirin To a Child or Teenager Who Has the Flu

The Myth of the "Stomach Flu"

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.

