

Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza, or the flu, is a viral infection that attacks through the respiratory tract. There are three basic types of flu viruses -- A, B and C -- but only the A and B types are responsible for outbreaks. In a normal year, influenza virus makes more than 50 million Americans sick and 40,000 die due to complications of the flu.

Many people who experience diarrhea talk about having "the stomach flu." This is not influenza, but rather another viral or bacterial infection. Flu is primarily a respiratory illness.

How do I get influenza?

Flu spreads like a cold, primarily person-to-person via virus-contaminated airborne droplets that are expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. The illness also can be spread by hands contaminated with the virus and objects touched by those contaminated hands.

Unfortunately, persons who have not yet shown symptoms can also transmit the flu virus. The time between becoming infected and developing symptoms of the flu is 1-4 days, and during that time you can spread the virus to other people. Once flu symptoms develop, you remain contagious for another 3-7 days. Children may be contagious for more than 7 days.

What are the symptoms of flu?

Persons with flu may have fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue, muscle aches, headaches, runny nose and watery eyes. Children may throw up and have diarrhea in addition to these symptoms. Some elderly persons may not have fevers. Although the fever and body aches usually last for 3-5 days, coughing and feeling tired may continue for 2 weeks or more.

What is the treatment for the flu?

Rest and liquids are usually enough. Children should not be given aspirin to control fever, but rather a non-aspirin medication. There are several different anti-flu medications available and all require a prescription. None of these medications "cure" the flu, but they have been shown to shorten the length of symptoms, provided the medications are started within the first 48 hours of becoming ill.

Persons who have flu symptoms should not go to work, school or day care, or any other place where people gather, such as church, movies, and stores.

I had the flu before. Am I immune?

Generally, no. The viruses that cause flu change a lot, so people who have been infected or given a flu shot in previous years may become infected with a new kind. Because of this, and because any immunity produced by a flu shot possibly will decrease in the year after vaccination, people in high-risk groups should be vaccinated every year.

Who are the high-risk groups?

The following groups have a higher risk for serious illness with the flu and should get a vaccine:

- all people 65 years of age and older;
- residents of nursing homes and other institutions housing patients of any age who have serious long-term health problems;
- adults and children who have chronic pulmonary or cardiovascular diseases, including asthma;
- adults and children who have chronic metabolic diseases (such as diabetes), kidney disease, hemoglobinopathies, or immunosuppression;
- children and teenagers, 6 months of age to 18 years old, who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy.

Who should get the flu shot?

Every year, the people listed in the high-risk groups should be vaccinated against flu. In addition, the vaccine is recommended for household contacts of high-risk people and health care workers. Pregnant women should consult their physician before taking a flu shot -- the vaccine poses no known risk to a fetus.

Children generally do not need to a flu shot. If you do decide to get your child a flu shot and the child is 12 years old or younger, he/she would get a split-virus vaccine. This is a modified version of the vaccine used in older children and adults and it is slightly more expensive. Those children under 9 years of age who previously had not had a flu shot would receive two doses of the vaccine one month apart, with the second dose given before December.

Flu shots are available through your physician. Also many organizations sell flu shots throughout the community, often in grocery stores or shopping malls. For persons with Medicare, the cost of the vaccine and its administration are paid for by the federal government.

Are flu shots effective?

Flu shots are the best preventive step one can take for the flu. Flu shots are not perfect as the virus usually changes slightly between the time the vaccine is being made and the start of the annual flu season. In most years, the flu vaccine protects 70-90% of the people who are vaccinated, and it is most effective in younger people. The flu vaccine is less effective in preventing illness in elderly persons, but is 50-80% effective in preventing complications from flu.

It is impossible to get the flu from the flu shot because the viruses in the vaccine are dead and therefore, they are not capable of causing infection. The most common reaction to the shot is minor redness and soreness at the site of injection. This goes away in a day or two.

When should I get the flu shot?

Although influenza can occur at any time of the year, it generally occurs in the winter, beginning in November/December and continues through March. It takes about two weeks for your body to develop immunity to a flu shot so it is best to get vaccinated between the beginning of October and mid-November.

Once the annual flu outbreak strikes the metropolitan area, you can still be vaccinated, however, it is quite possible you will get the flu before your vaccination is effective.