



## Influenza (the flu)

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

- fever
- headache
- tiredness (can be extreme)
- dry cough
- sore throat
- nasal congestion
- body aches

These symptoms are usually referred to as "flu-like symptoms."

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

Most people who get the flu will recover in 1 to 2 weeks, but some people will develop life-threatening complications (such as pneumonia) as a result of the infection. Millions of people in the United States — about 10% to 20% of U.S. residents — will get the flu each year. An average of about 36,000 people per year in the United States die from the flu, and 114,000 per year have to be admitted to the hospital. Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people), and serious problems from flu can happen at any age. People  $\geq 65$  years old, people of any age with chronic medical conditions, and very young children are more likely to get complications from flu. Pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections are 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.

### **How the Influenza Virus Is Passed Around**

The flu is spread, or transmitted, when a person who has the flu coughs, sneezes, or speaks and sends flu virus into the air, and other people inhale the virus. The virus enters the nose, throat, or lungs of a person and begins to multiply, causing symptoms. Influenza may, less often, be spread when a person touches a surface that has flu viruses on it – a door handle, for instance – and then touches his or her nose or mouth.

### **The Flu Is Contagious**

A person can spread the flu starting one day before they feel sick. Adults can continue to pass the virus to others for another 3-7 days after symptoms start. Children can pass the virus for longer than 7 days. Symptoms start 1-4 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 to others.

## **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, 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 influenza 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
- avoid using alcohol and tobacco
- take medication to relieve the symptoms of flu
- for children avoid medications that contain aspirin

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. Proper hand washing is another way to help prevent the spread of influenza.

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

*Never* give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms – and particularly fever – without first speaking to your doctor. Giving aspirin to children and teenagers who have influenza can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye Syndrome. Children or teenagers with the flu should get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids, and take medicines that contain *no aspirin* to relieve symptoms.