

What is Influenza?

What is influenza (also called flu)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year.

Signs and symptoms of flu

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:

- Fever or feeling feverish/chills.
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue (very tired)
- Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though these symptoms are rare.

How flu spreads

Most experts believe that 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.

Period of contagiousness

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick.

How serious is the flu?

Flu is unpredictable and how severe it is can vary widely from one season. 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), and persons who live in facilities like nursing homes.

Flu seasons are unpredictable and can be severe. Over a period of 30 years, between 1976 and 2006, estimates of flu-associated deaths in the United States range from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000 people.

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.

Preventing seasonal flu: Get vaccinated

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each season.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses.

The seasonal flu vaccine protects against the three influenza viruses that research suggests will be most common.

Can the flu be treated?

Yes. There are prescription medications called "antiviral drugs" that can be used to treat influenza illness.

What are antiviral drugs?

Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) that fight against the flu in your body. Antiviral drugs are not sold over-the-counter. You can only get them if you have a prescription from your doctor or health care provider. Antiviral drugs are different from antibiotics, which fight against bacterial infections.

What are the benefits of antiviral drugs?

When used for treatment, antiviral drugs can lessen symptoms and shorten the time you are sick by 1 or 2 days. They also can prevent serious flu complications, like pneumonia. For people with a high risk medical condition, treatment with an antiviral drug can mean the difference between having a milder illness versus a very serious illness that could result in a hospital stay.

What are the possible side effects of antiviral drugs?

Some side effects have been associated with the use of flu antiviral drugs, including nausea, vomiting, dizziness, runny or stuffy nose, cough, diarrhea, headache and some behavioral side effects - These are more common in younger children. Your doctor can give you more information about these drugs or you can check the CDC or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) websites.