

# Influenza

## What is influenza?

Influenza (also called flu) is a viral infection of the nose, throat, trachea, and bronchi (air passages). Outbreaks of flu occur almost every year, usually in winter. The influenza virus causes more severe symptoms and can cause more severe complications than cold viruses.

## How does it occur?

The virus that causes flu is spread from person to person by droplets that are coughed or sneezed into the air. It may also be passed by the hands of someone who has the flu.

## What are the symptoms?

Influenza tends to start suddenly. You may feel fine one hour and have a high fever the next.

The usual first symptoms are:

- chills and fever (often 101 to 103 degrees F, or 38 to 40 degrees C)
- sweating
- muscle aches
- headache.

Symptoms soon to follow may include:

- runny nose and nasal congestion
- cough
- sore throat
- eyes sensitive to light.

## How is it diagnosed?

Influenza can usually be diagnosed from your symptoms. Your health care provider may do a physical exam to rule out other types of infection, such as strep throat and sinusitis.

## How is it treated?

Often you can diagnose and treat yourself. However, you should always see your health care provider if:

- You are over the age of 65.
- You suffer from heart disease, asthma, chronic bronchitis, kidney disease, or diabetes.
- You have an impaired immune system (for example, because you are taking steroids for another medical problem).

- Your symptoms become more severe, or you have a painful cough and are coughing up phlegm. This may indicate you have pneumonia or bronchitis.

To take care of yourself at home:

- Drink a lot of liquids. Water, juice, and noncaffeinated drinks are best. Especially when you have a high fever, your body needs much more liquid than when you are healthy. Having enough fluids also helps the mucus in your sinuses and lungs to stay thin and easy to clear from the body. When the mucus is thin, it is less likely to cause a sinus infection or bronchitis.
- Consider taking acetaminophen or ibuprofen to relieve headaches and muscle aches and to lower a fever. (Do NOT use aspirin if you have the flu.) Some doctors feel that because fever is part of the immune system's reaction to infection, it is better to let a fever run its course than to try to lower it. Letting the fever run its course, however, can be dangerous in children and the elderly. Also, most healthy adults feel much better if the fever is decreased even 1 or 2 degrees.
- If your nose or sinuses become congested, a decongestant medicine may help you feel better and may possibly help prevent ear or sinus infections.
- Take cough medicine to help control your cough.
- Antihistamine medicine can be helpful if a runny nose is making it hard for you to sleep. However, antihistamine has a very drying effect and may cause the mucus in your nose, throat, and lungs to become thick and dry.

There are medicines your health care provider can prescribe that can make flu symptoms less severe. They may also help the symptoms not last as long. Examples of these drugs are amantadine (Symadine or Symmetrel), rimantadine (Flumadine), zanamivir (Relenza), and oseltamivir (Tamiflu). These flu medicines are available as tablets or nasal sprays. They must be started within the first 48 hours of illness to be effective. Usually they need to be taken only a few days. A common side effect of the tablets is lightheadedness or dizziness.

## How long will the effects last?

Flu symptoms usually last 3 to 7 days. They often start improving gradually after the first 2 days or so.

Infection with the flu virus often leads to other infections, such as ear, sinus, and bronchial infections. Pneumonia can also occur as a result of the flu. It can be caused by the flu virus itself or by bacteria invading lung tissues that have been damaged by the virus. Pneumonia is a common cause of death in people over the age of 65 and often occurs during and after flu outbreaks.

An unusual complication of flu is Reye's syndrome, which usually occurs in children and adolescents and rarely occurs in adults. Reye's syndrome is not well understood but it involves failure of the liver and brain swelling, which together can lead to coma and sometimes death. A link has been shown between the use of aspirin during influenza illness and the development of Reye's syndrome. For this reason it is best to AVOID taking aspirin when you have the flu.

## What can I do to prevent influenza?

The best way to prevent flu is to get a flu shot every October. Flu shots are about 70% effective in preventing flu. Because the flu virus strain varies from year to year, you need to get a new flu shot each year. Vaccination against pneumococcal pneumonia is also important after age 65.

If a flu epidemic has begun and you have not been immunized but need some protection, your health care provider may prescribe amantadine or rimantadine. These drugs can decrease your chances of getting the flu during the outbreak. If you do get the flu, the medicines can make your symptoms less severe. You will need to take these medicines until the flu epidemic has left your community, which may be several weeks.

The simplest, oldest method of avoiding spread of infection is frequent hand washing, preferably with antibacterial soap from a sanitary dispenser. It is also a good practice not to eat in or near your workplace. Your hands or food might be contaminated with the virus particles from co-workers, customers, or schoolchildren, depending on your place of work.