

Special Edition - Seasonal Influenza

Today, the United States is facing severe cases of seasonal influenza, and deaths are already being reported across the country. More and more citizens are increasingly concerned that they will be directly impacted by the continued spread of this infectious virus.

The early and aggressive start to the flu season has already been described as "alarming," and, you shouldn't wait to take steps to protect yourself and your loved ones from infection. The sooner you ready yourself for seasonal influenza, the better off you and your family will be when the illness spreads through your community.

This special edition newsletter is focused on helping you understand seasonal influenza, the steps you can take to maintain your health at work and at home, and methods for weathering the sickness should you or a loved one become infected. Knowledge and preparation are your best tools to fight seasonal influenza, and these resources will help you make the smart decisions to keep you out of bed and on your feet.

Influenza

Influenza is a viral respiratory infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that ranks as one of the most severe illnesses of the winter season (flu season is generally December through March). It is not the same as the "stomach flu." An estimated 10 to 20 percent of the population get influenza every year.

Usually influenza is not considered life threatening for healthy adults. However, it can lead to very serious complications, such as pneumonia and bronchitis, especially in people over age 65, young children, and those with chronic illnesses.



Causes

Influenza is caused by a virus. It is highly contagious and is spread when an infected person touches or shakes hands with another, sneezes and coughs without covering the mouth, or touches objects such as doorknobs that other people may touch.

Symptoms

Influenza symptoms differ from those of a cold. Flu symptoms are usually more serious and leave you lying flat on your back. Unlike the stomach flu, influenza usually does not cause vomiting or diarrhea.

Flu symptoms include:

- Fever, often 102 to 104 F (it may last up to seven days)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- Body/muscle aches, which may be severe
- Stomach symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea also can occur but are more common in children than adults
- Dry cough (sometimes severe)
- Mild-stuffy or runny nose and sore throat

Treatment

Because influenza is a viral infection, it cannot be treated with antibiotics. Antiviral medications are available that may reduce the severity and shorten the length of the flu if given within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

Two antiviral medications have been approved for use in preventing the flu but should not be considered replacements for an annual flu vaccination.

These medications are not helpful in treating the complications that may result from influenza and each medication has a different set of side effects. You should discuss these with your doctor before taking one of the medications.

Self-Care Steps for Influenza

When you have the flu, try these steps to help you feel more comfortable:

- Stay home and get the rest you need. It is one of the best ways to deal with influenza, and it keeps you from spreading it to other people.
- Drink extra fluids. Warm fluids are soothing, especially if your throat is irritated. Drinking adequate fluids is important to prevent dehydration when you have a fever.
- To relieve nasal congestion, sleep with your head elevated. For adults, over-the-counter decongestants can be used. Be sure to follow the recommended dosage and precautions. If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, coronary artery disease, thyroid disease, or are pregnant, talk to your doctor about using decongestants.
- Treat your headache, sore muscles, and fever with aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen. Do not give aspirin to children under age 21.

Getting immunized against the flu (either a shot or the live nasal vaccine) is the best way to protect yourself from influenza. There are also other steps you can take to protect yourself and prevent the spread of the disease:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 15 to 30 seconds.
- Keep your hands away from your nose, eyes, and mouth. If flu germs get on your hands, you can infect yourself by rubbing your eyes or touching your nose or mouth.
- Wash your hands after you've handled objects such as doorknobs, telephones, and toys.
- Wash your hands if you have the flu to avoid infecting others.
- Keep at a distance from people who are coughing and sneezing.
- Limit the time you stay in the same room with a sick person.
- Avoid exposure to the virus. Crowds of people may mean a lot of flu virus in the air. If you are sick, stay home and get the rest you need.
- Don't share your personal items, including towels, washcloths, silverware, cups, glasses, straws, razors, and toothbrushes.
- Keep up your resistance to infection with a good diet, plenty of rest, and regular exercise.

About Flu Shots

Influenza vaccine is effective in preventing the flu for about 70 percent of people. You need to get a flu shot every year, because the virus that causes influenza may change from year to year and protection decreases over 12 months. The vaccine does not contain live virus, so you cannot get the flu from it. The best time to get an influenza vaccination is between October and mid-November, but it can be given until the flu season (December through March) is over.

Most people have no side effects from receiving the vaccine. Redness or swelling at the injection site may occur for one to two days. Occasionally, fever and muscle aches may also be present.

Who should get a flu shot?

- Anyone age 50 or older
- Women who will be in their second or third trimester of pregnancy during flu season
- People of all ages with heart or lung disease (including asthma), diabetes, kidney disorders, anemia, or an immune deficiency caused by cancer treatment, steroids (prednisone), or human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS)
- Children 6 to 23 months old
- Anyone who comes in close contact with the people listed above
- Anyone who wants to reduce the chance of catching the flu
- Healthcare workers

People who should not get a flu shot include:

- Anyone with a serious allergy to chicken eggs
- Anyone who has had a serious reaction to a previous dose of influenza vaccine
- People who are allergic to thimerosal, a preservative used in the vaccine
- People with a history of Guillain-Barre syndrome
- Babies younger than 6 months

Symptoms/Signs	Action
Fatigue, fever, headache, muscle aches	Use self-care
Symptoms worsening after 3 to 5 days	Call provider's office
Persistent or worsening chest discomfort, mild wheezing	See provider
Fever over 101F for more than 3 days or that was gone for 24 hours and has returned	See provider
Fever in someone who is over age 65, pregnant, has a history of chronic illness, or is immunocompromised	See provider
Symptoms of dehydration (dry mouth, increased thirst, dizziness and no urinary output for 12 hours)	Seek help now
Significant pain with breathing; continuous coughing or mild wheezing; fever over 101F and stiff neck; severe headache	Seek help now
Choking or gasping for air; inability to swallow; bluish lips or nails; severe wheezing	Call 911

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A Simple Way to Keep the Flu Away

You can avoid the flu this season by taking one simple step: Get a flu vaccination.

Unfortunately, some people think that getting a flu immunization is too much trouble or costs too much. Or, they swear that a flu immunization will make them sick or make them more likely to catch the flu — or even colds.

Influenza — the flu — is caused by one of several strains of influenza viruses (type A or B) that infect the nose, throat, and lungs, making life miserable for a week or two for many people — and deadly for some. Flu season can peak anywhere from late December to early March, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



Immunization facts

Your best defense against the flu is to get immunized. Depending on your age, you can do that in one of two ways:

- With a flu shot, given with a needle. This form of the vaccine contains killed virus and is approved for all people over the age of 6 months.
- With a nasal-spray vaccine. This form contains live, weakened flu viruses that cannot cause the flu. This form is approved for healthy, non-pregnant people ages 5 to 49 years.

A flu vaccination is most important for children 6 months and older; adults ages 50 and older; anyone with a chronic disease; anyone who lives in a nursing home or other long-term care site; health care workers; and people who are in frequent contact with the elderly or chronically ill. The CDC says children 8 years old and younger who are immunized for the first time should get two full doses of vaccine, one month apart.

Doctors also advise flu shots for women who plan to be pregnant during flu season. Flu shots are OK for breastfeeding mothers, the CDC says.

Even if you don't fall into one of the above groups, however, you are still a candidate for the vaccine if you want to avoid the flu.

Talk to your doctor first

Some people should not be vaccinated for the flu before talking to their health care provider, the CDC says. Talk to your doctor if:

- You have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- You have had a severe reaction to a flu immunization in the past.
- You developed Guillain-Barre syndrome within six weeks of a previous flu immunization.

Children younger than 6 months of age should not be immunized against the flu, because the flu vaccines have not been approved for that age group.

If you are ill with a moderate or severe illness that includes a fever, you should wait to get vaccinated until your symptoms lessen, the CDC says.

Other prevention steps

Flu viruses are spread by contact with droplets sneezed or coughed from an infected person. Inhaling the droplets is the most common route to getting the flu, but many people also become infected by touching objects the droplets have

landed on. You can spread the virus to others before you feel sick yourself. The CDC says you are infectious a day before symptoms begin and up to five days afterward.

You help protect yourself against the flu by doing simple things like washing your hands before eating and not putting your hands near your face or in your mouth. You don't need special cleansers when washing your hands; washing for 15 to 20 seconds with ordinary soap works fine. If someone in your family has the flu, you can keep surfaces clean of the virus by wiping them with a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water.

The other effective means of flu prevention is humidity. The flu bug exists in higher quantities in dry nasal and oral passages, which is one reason why flu epidemics occur in dry winter months. By raising the humidity in your workplace and at home to keep your nasal passages and mouth moist, your body will be better able to flush out the flu bug.

Rooting out rumors

Don't believe the rumor that a flu shot can give you even a mild case of influenza. It is impossible. Neither form of the vaccine — by injection or nasal spray — contains a form of the flu virus that can give you the flu. The injected form of the vaccine is made from particles of dead flu virus cells, and the nasal spray contains live viruses that have been damaged, so they can't cause a major infection.

When you are injected with the flu vaccine, your body reacts as if it has been infected with the actual living virus and makes antibodies that provide immunity against the real virus. These antibodies remain at high levels for only six to nine months. These waning antibody levels are one reason why you need to be revaccinated each year.

The main reason you should be revaccinated yearly is that the flu virus is constantly changing and evolving into new strains. Each year the CDC attempts to predict which flu strain will be predominant. The CDC works with vaccine manufacturers to produce the specific vaccine that will combat the predicted strain.

If you are concerned about the cost of a flu immunization, check with your local health department for locations in your area where free flu shots are given.

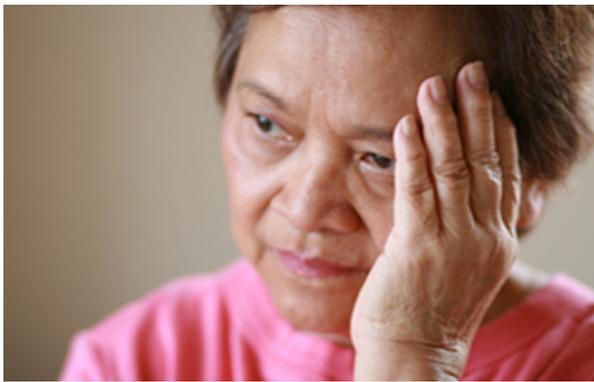
Treating yourself at home

When you are exposed to the flu, the virus incubates for three to five days before symptoms begin. You probably have the flu if you come down with a high fever, sore throat, muscle aches, and a cough (usually dry). The symptoms in children may also include vomiting, diarrhea, and ear infections. Flu is usually self-treatable but has to run its course. You can treat symptoms by getting bed rest, drinking plenty of fluids, taking acetaminophen for aches and pains, and using a humidifier to keep nasal passages moist.

Expect the flu to last about five days, which is the time it takes your body to produce the antibodies that finally beat the infection. After that time, you will be protected from that strain of influenza for the rest of the season. Some people continue to feel ill and cough for more than two weeks. In some cases, the flu can make health conditions such as asthma or diabetes worse or lead to complications such as bacterial pneumonia. Adults older than 65 and people with chronic health conditions have the greatest risk for complications from the flu, the CDC says.

Four prescription drugs are available to treat the flu — amantadine, rimantadine, zanamivir, and oseltamivir — but must be taken within the first two days of illness to be effective, the CDC says. They can reduce the length of time flu symptoms are present. These medications usually are used in hospital, nursing homes, and other institutions where people are at high risk for complications of the flu. Talk to your health care provider if you think you should take one of these medications. These medications are not meant as a substitute for vaccination.

Krames Staywell



Here it comes again, the dreaded cold and flu season. Chances are you've been dealing with these common illnesses throughout your life. So why should you deal with them any differently now? Because as you get older, your body has a harder time fighting off infection. Once you have a cold or the flu, there is a greater chance that it will develop into a more serious illness. Also, if you have a chronic illness such as emphysema or diabetes, flu can be very serious or even life-threatening.

For these reasons, you need to take extra steps to protect yourself against infection. You also need to recognize flu-related symptoms and to learn when it's time to see your doctor. By

doing so, you can prevent your cold or flu from turning into a more serious illness.

A cold versus the flu

The following are symptoms of both colds and flu:

- Sore throat
- Runny nose and sneezing
- Headache
- Overall sick feeling
- Low-grade fever

The flu is more likely to lead to pneumonia. For this reason, you need to know if you have a cold or the flu. A cold usually does not cause high fever, while the flu can. A fever above 101 degrees is usually considered high. Also, a stuffy nose is probably a sign of a cold, rather than the flu. Overall, cold symptoms are milder and do not last as long as flu symptoms.

Cozy up to self-care

Because colds and flu are caused by viruses, there is no cure. You just have to let them run their course. Pamper yourself by resting and drinking plenty of fluids. Talk with your doctor about over-the-counter medicines that may help ease your symptoms.

Know when to see your doctor

The following symptoms may indicate a problem more serious than a common cold or the flu:

- Chest pain
- Wheezing
- A high fever
- Frequent colds
- Shortness of breath that comes with little or no exertion
- Phlegm or mucus produced for two or more weeks
- A cough that lasts two weeks or produces blood

A persistent cough with a fever, for instance, could be a sign of pneumonia. See your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms or if any symptoms last longer than usual for a common cold or the flu. The earlier you catch problems, the more easily they can be treated.

Think prevention

The following vaccinations can protect you from the flu and pneumonia.

- **Influenza vaccine.** You can protect yourself from the flu by getting a flu shot. It can be helpful if the people you spend time with also get flu shots. Because strains of the virus that causes the flu change each year, you'll need to get a flu shot each year. It's best to get the flu shot in the fall before the flu season starts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that the following people get an annual flu shot: anyone age 50 or older; residents of nursing homes and long-term care facilities; adults and children older than 6 months who have chronic heart or lung conditions; adults and children older than 6 months who have metabolic diseases like diabetes, kidney disease or have a weakened immune system; and women who will be more than three months pregnant during flu season. People who have a severe allergy to eggs should not get a flu shot.
- **Pneumococcal pneumonia vaccine.** One of the most serious complications of the flu is pneumonia. You can protect yourself against the most common kind of pneumonia (pneumococcal) by getting a shot. Most people need the pneumonia shot only once in their lifetime. If you're not sure if you've gotten this shot, ask your doctor. The CDC recommends a pneumococcal vaccine for anyone age 65 or older and anyone who has a chronic disease or has a weakened immune system.

No vaccination can prevent the common cold. The best way to prevent one is to wash your hands often and avoid sharing cups, utensils, and towels with people who are sick. It is also helpful to keep your body and mind in good shape by eating a healthy diet, managing your stress, and getting enough sleep.

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