



Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza ("flu" for short) is a highly contagious viral respiratory infection. It affects all ages groups, but especially children, infants, and the elderly.

When do you see influenza?

The influenza season usually lasts from late October through March, but outbreaks can arise any part of the year.

What are signs and symptoms of influenza?

- A sudden fever (usually above 101°F or 38.3°C)
- Chills and body shakes
- Headache, body aches, and being a lot more tired than usual
- Sore throat
- Dry, hacking cough
- Stuffy, runny nose
- Some children may throw up (vomit) and have loose stools (diarrhea)
- Infants with the flu also may seem fussy all of a sudden or just "not look right."
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How long does influenza last?

Most times, the fever will last upwards of 5 days. The cold symptoms, cough, and fatigue may take up to 1-2 weeks to resolve. It is important to monitor for worsening symptoms because pneumonia and other life-threatening complications can occur.

How contagious is the Flu?

The flu is spread by virus-infected droplets that are coughed or sneezed into the air. People who are infected can spread the virus from a day before they feel sick until their symptoms have ended (about 1 week for adults, but this can be longer for young kids).

The flu usually occurs in small outbreaks, but sometimes can spread quickly. This is known as an epidemic. An epidemic peaks within 2 or 3 weeks after the first cases occur.

When an epidemic spreads throughout the world, it's known as a pandemic. The most recent flu pandemic occurred in 2009-2010, with the H1N1 ("swine") flu.

Why should my child get the flu shot every year?

Routine annual influenza vaccination is recommended for everyone 6 months old and older. It's usually offered between August and mid-November, but may be given at other times of the year. Each year, researchers try to predict which strains of influenza will spread across the world. The most likely strains are then targeted with upcoming seasonal flu vaccine. While the vaccine doesn't completely guarantee against getting sick, someone who's been vaccinated will have fewer and milder symptoms if they contract the virus.

People who got the vaccine one year aren't protected from getting the flu the next because the protection wears off and flu viruses constantly change. That's why the vaccine is updated each year to include the most current strains of the virus.

What types of vaccines are available?

There are two types of vaccines available to children.

The nasal mist is a live weakened viral vaccine that is sprayed into the nostrils. It is licensed to children 2 years and older.

The injectable vaccine does not contain any live components but still is effective at preventing influenza infection. It is offered to infants as young as 6 months and also is the preferred vaccine for children with certain medical conditions (immunodeficiency, children on chemotherapy, severe asthmatics).

It can take about 2 weeks after the shot for the body to build up protection to the flu. Getting the shot before the flu season is in full force gives the body a chance to build up immunity to, or protection from, the virus.

What are the side effects of the vaccine?

While very few people get side effects from the seasonal flu vaccine, those who do may have soreness or swelling at the site of the injection or mild side effects, such as headache or low-grade fever.

Some people who get the nasal spray vaccine also may develop mild flu-like symptoms, including runny nose, headache, vomiting, muscle aches, and fever.

Besides vaccination, what are other ways to prevent acquiring influenza?

- Avoiding large crowds can help during flu season, but it's often impossible to keep kids cooped up.
- Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently with soap, especially after using the bathroom, after coughing or sneezing, and before eating.
- Never pick up used tissues.

- Never share cups and eating utensils.
- Stay home from work or school when you're sick with the flu or other serious illness.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, then put it in the trash. If a tissue isn't available, cough or sneeze into your upper arm, not into your hands.

What are some home remedies?

- drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration
- get plenty of sleep and take it easy
- take acetaminophen or ibuprofen to relieve fever and aches (do not give aspirin to children or teens as it may cause a rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome)
- wear layers, since the flu often makes them cold one minute and hot the next (wearing layers — like a T-shirt, sweatshirt, and robe — makes it easy to add or subtract clothes as needed)

What medications are available?

Cases of the flu rarely require specific medical treatment. Some children and especially infants can develop complications (pneumonia, ear and sinus infections) which require antibiotics. Other children may become severely dehydrated and need to be hospitalized to receive intravenous hydration.

For a severely ill child or one with other special circumstances, a doctor may prescribe an antiviral medicine that can decrease the duration of illness by 1-2 days and prevent potential complications of the flu. This medicine can only be helpful if it's given within 2 days of the onset of the flu. Most healthy children who contract the flu do not need to take an antiviral medication. If any medication is prescribed, be sure to discuss any possible side effects with your doctor.

How long should I keep my child home?

Kids who are sick should stay home from school or childcare until they are without fever for at least 24 hours without relying on the use of a fever-reducing medicine (Tylenol, Motrin, Advil, etc). You may want to keep your child home longer, depending on how he or she is feeling. If you have questions or concerns, talk to your doctor.

When should I call the office?

- has flu symptoms
- has a high fever, or fever with a rash
- has trouble breathing or rapid breathing
- has bluish skin color
- is not drinking enough fluids or constantly vomiting
- is urinating less than 3 times a day
- seems very sleepy or lethargic
- seems confused or irritable
- has symptoms that get better, but then get worse.