

Fact Sheet

Influenza General Public

Influenza

Influenza is a highly contagious viral infection that affects mainly the nose, throat, bronchi and, occasionally, lungs. The flu may cause mild to severe illness, and may even lead to death. In the very young, the elderly, and those with other serious medical conditions, infection can lead to severe complications such as pneumonia.

Symptoms of Influenza

Symptoms of influenza include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Stomach symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, also can occur but are more common in children than adults

The Spread of Influenza

Flu viruses mainly spread from person to person through coughing or sneezing of people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five days after becoming sick. That means that 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.

Prevention of Influenza

How can you prevent the flu?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccination each year. There are two types of vaccines:

- The “flu” shot- an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people six months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine- a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”. LAIV is approved for use in healthy people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant.

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.

Vaccination

Yearly flu vaccination should begin in September or as soon as vaccine is available and continue through the influenza season, into December, January, and beyond. This is because the timing and duration of influenza seasons vary. While influenza outbreaks can happen as early as October, most of the time influenza activity peaks in January.

In general, anyone who wants to reduce the chances of getting the flu can get vaccinated. However, certain people should get vaccinated each year either because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for high risk persons. During flu seasons when vaccine supplies are limited or delayed, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) makes recommendations regarding priority groups for vaccination.

People who fall into high risk categories for influenza complications and transmission include:

- Children aged six months up to their 19th birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:

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- Health care workers
- Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
- Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than six months of age (these children are too young to be vaccinated)

The Nasal Spray Vaccine

Vaccination with the nasal spray flu vaccine is an option for healthy people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant, even healthy persons who live with or care for those in a high risk group. The one exception is healthy persons who care for persons with severely weakened immune systems who require a protected environment; these healthy persons should get the inactivated vaccine.

The Need for Annual Vaccination

The influenza virus changes every year as it makes its way around the world. Public health providers and people who make flu vaccines decide each year which kinds of flu are most likely to make people sick. They put the top three kinds into the vaccine. Since viruses are almost never the same from year to year, the kinds of influenza in the vaccine changes each year. The vaccine only protects you from influenza for one year.

Antiviral Medications

Influenza antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid, or an inhaler) that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. Antiviral drugs can make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. This could be especially important for people at high risk.

What should I do to protect myself and my family from the flu?

- **Washing your hands** often with soap and water for at least 15-20 seconds. Wash your hands before and after eating, going to the bathroom, or touching pets, phones, or keyboards.
- **Use hand sanitizer.** If you cannot wash your hands, alcohol-based hand cleaner may be used if your hands do not look dirty.
- **Stay home** from work or school when you are ill, and encourage others to do the same.
- **Stay away from others you know are ill.** You are less likely to become ill if you stay at least three feet from someone who is coughing or sneezing.
- **Vaccination.** The first line of defense against influenza is to get your influenza vaccination each year.
- **Contact your health care provider.** If you experience flu-like symptoms contact your physician. Your physician may be able to prescribe antiviral medications for you to shorten the duration of the illness and prevent transmission.
- **Clean frequently and appropriately.** Frequently clean commonly used surfaces, such as door handles, handrails, eating surfaces, toys, and phones. Commercial disinfectants or bleach solutions should be used. (Mixing ¼ cup bleach with 1 gallon of water makes bleach solution.) Some viruses can live from 20 minutes up to two hours or more on some surfaces.