

# Influenza (Flu)

Flu is a serious contagious disease that can lead to hospitalization and sometimes death.

## How does flu spread?

Most experts think that flu viruses are 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 or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. A person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own eyes, mouth or nose.

## How long can a sick person spread flu to others?

People infected with flu shed virus and may be able to infect others from 1 day before getting sick to about 5-7 days after getting sick. This can be longer in some people, especially children and people with weakened immune systems. This 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.

## How severe is illness associated with flu?

Each flu season, different flu viruses spread and affect people differently based on their body's ability to fight infection. Even healthy children and adults can get very sick from the flu and spread it to friends, co-workers, and family. In the United States, thousands of healthy adults and children have to visit the doctor or are hospitalized from flu complications each year.

While flu can make anyone sick, certain people are at greater risk for severe illness resulting in hospitalization or death. This includes older adults, young children, people with certain long term health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease and women who are pregnant. (See "What should I do if I get sick?" for the full list of high risk persons.)

## What can I do to protect myself from getting sick from flu?

CDC recommends a three-step approach to fighting the flu: vaccination, everyday preventive actions, and the correct use of antiviral drugs if your doctor recommends them.

# Prevention

## #1 A flu vaccine is the first and most important step in protecting against flu viruses.

■ While there are many different flu viruses, the flu vaccine protects against the viruses that research indicates will be most common.

■ Flu vaccines protect against three or four viruses; an H1N1, an H3N2, and one or two influenza B viruses, depending on the vaccine.

■ Everyone 6 months of age and older should get vaccinated against the flu each year.

■ Vaccination of high risk persons is especially important to decrease their risk of severe flu illness. Vaccination also is important for health care workers, and those who live with or care for high risk people to keep from spreading flu to high risk people.

■ Children younger than 6 months are at high risk of serious flu illness, but are too young to be vaccinated. People who care for or live with them should be vaccinated to protect these babies.

## #2 Take everyday actions to help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses.

■ Try to avoid close contact with sick people.

■ If you are sick with flu-like illness, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.

■ While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.

■ Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.

■ Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.

■ Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.

■ Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs like the flu.

## #3 Take flu antiviral drugs if your doctor prescribes them.

■ If you get the flu, antiviral drugs can treat your illness. These drugs can make illness milder and shorten the time you are sick.

■ Antiviral drugs work best when started in the first 2 days of symptoms to treat people who are very sick (such as those who are hospitalized) or people who are sick with flu symptoms and who are at increased risk of severe flu illness.

## If You Get Sick

### What should I do if I get sick?

If you become ill with influenza symptoms you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to seek medical care. Most people are able to recover at home from flu without medical care.

However, some people are at greater risk of serious flu-related complications. They are:

- Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old
- People 65 and older
- Pregnant women
- People who have:
  - Asthma
  - Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions [including disorders of the brain, spinal cord, peripheral nerve, and muscle such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy (seizure disorders), stroke, intellectual disability (mental retardation), moderate to severe developmental delay, muscular dystrophy, or spinal cord injury].
  - Chronic lung disease (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD] and cystic fibrosis)
  - Heart disease (such as congenital heart disease, congestive heart failure and coronary artery disease)
  - Blood disorders (such as sickle cell disease)



- Endocrine disorders (such as diabetes mellitus)
- Kidney disorders
- Liver disorders
- Metabolic disorders (such as inherited metabolic disorders and mitochondrial disorders)
- Weakened immune system due to disease or medication (such as people with HIV or AIDS, or cancer, or those on chronic steroids)
- People younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy
- People who are morbidly obese (Body Mass Index, or BMI, of 40 or greater)

If you (or your child) are in one of the groups above and develop flu-like symptoms, consult a health care provider to get advice about seeking medical care. Also, it's possible for otherwise healthy people to develop severe illness, so any one concerned about their illness should consult their doctor.

There are "emergency warning signs" that should signal anyone to seek medical care urgently.

### Emergency Warning Signs In Children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

### In Adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

### Are there medicines to treat infection with flu?

Yes. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) that fight against the flu in your body. While a flu vaccine is the first and most important step in preventing flu, antiviral drugs are a second line of defense to treat the flu if you get sick. Antiviral drugs are not sold over-the-counter; you must have a prescription to get them. Antiviral drugs are not a substitute for vaccination.

### How long should I stay home if I'm sick?

CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.) Stay away from others as much as possible to keep from making others sick. Continue to cover coughs and sneezes and wash hands even after you return to work. It is important to know that even if you don't have a fever, you may have flu and be contagious if you get flu symptoms.

### Flu Symptoms can include

- fever \*
- cough
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- body aches
- headache
- chills
- fatigue
- sometimes diarrhea and vomiting

\*It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.

For more information, visit  
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu>  
 or call  
**800-CDC-INFO.**

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# Flu & You



**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
 National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases