

Influenza (flu): *What you need to know and do*

What is influenza?

Influenza (“the flu” for short) is a common respiratory (nose, throat, lungs) infection caused by a virus. There are several flu virus strains (from specific types of germs), and they can change from year to year. These strains are called Type A and Type B. (Type C also causes the flu, but the symptoms are less severe.)

Flu symptoms include:

- Fever and/or chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body aches and/or headache
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea and vomiting

Most people who get the flu get better on their own without medical treatment. However, some groups have a higher risk of medical complications. Complications could mean a stay in the hospital. Severe complications could kill you. **This is why doctors recommend getting a flu shot every year.**

Who is at higher risk for medical complications?

Those at risk for medical complications from the flu include people who are:

- Pregnant
- Obese
- Infants and young children (age 6 months to 5 years)
- Younger than 19 years on long-term aspirin therapy
- 65 or older
- American Indians and Alaska Natives
- Living in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities
- Living with:
 - Chronic health conditions such as heart or lung disease (including asthma), diabetes, or kidney, nerve, or blood disorders
 - A weakened immune system due to conditions (such as HIV) or treatments (such as chemotherapy)



Getting a flu shot — The basics

Who: Everyone over 6 months old should get a flu shot every year.

How: The flu vaccine is only given as an injection. The nasal spray vaccine that was available before is not as effective as the injection, so it will not be given in the 2016–2017 season.

When: Since most flu cases happen in early winter, doctors recommend that you get a flu shot in the early fall. The timing of flu is different each year — usually from fall to spring — with a few cases in the summer.

Where: You can get a flu shot in many different places, including most neighborhood pharmacies. Find locations online at: flu.gov.

How Much: Most health insurance plans cover the cost of a yearly flu shot. Contact your health insurance provider to learn more.

How does the flu virus spread?

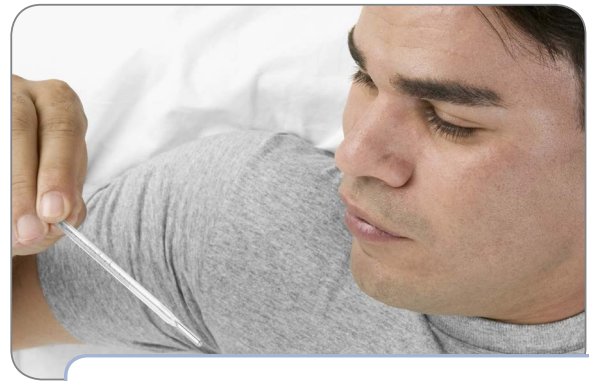
The flu spreads from person to person, mostly through coughs and sneezes. It can also be spread by touching a surface or object with flu viruses on it and then touching your mouth or nose. People with the flu can infect others starting **24 hours (1 day) before** they first have symptoms and for **5 to 7 days or more after** they have symptoms. This can be longer in some people, especially children and people with weak immune systems.

What should I do if I get the flu?

Antibiotics do not work on viral infections like the flu. Most people with the flu get well without medical treatment by:

- **Staying home and getting plenty of rest.**
- **Drinking plenty of fluids.**
- **Treating a fever** with acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin). Follow the instructions on the package — don't take more than the recommended dose. Do **NOT** give aspirin to anyone under age 18. (In children and teens, aspirin can trigger a serious illness called Reye's syndrome.)
- **Taking other medicines as directed.** If your doctor has prescribed medicine, follow all directions for taking it. Take it for as long as the label tells you to, even if you start feeling better.
- **Treating a stuffy nose** with an over-the-counter product. Salt water or decongestant nose drops or sprays may also help. (To avoid complications, don't use nasal sprays for more than 3 to 4 days.)
- **Easing a cough** by using a cold-water vaporizer.

Because some people may need to be treated in the hospital with antiviral medicines, you might need a lab test to diagnose the type of flu you have.



When should I call a doctor?

Call your doctor or make an appointment if you develop any of the following:

- Change in cough
- Increase in sputum (material you cough up or blow out your nose)
- Symptoms that get worse, rather than improving, after 3 days
- Worsening confusion

Call 911 or go to the hospital emergency department if you have severe symptoms such as:

- Severe trouble breathing
- Chest pain
- Loss of consciousness

How do I keep from spreading the flu?

- **Get a flu shot.**
- **Wash your hands** before and after every meal, every time you use the bathroom, and after you blow your nose, cough, or sneeze.
- **If you have flu symptoms:**
 - **Don't go out in public or go to work** for 5 to 7 days from the time your symptoms began or at least 24 hours after your fever goes away (without fever-reducing medicine), whichever is longer.
 - If you need to visit a clinic or hospital, **wear a surgical face mask** (or ask for one when you arrive). A face mask can help protect you and other patients.
 - **Cover your mouth with your elbow when you cough or sneeze.** Cough into your elbow rather than your hands.

