

Influenza

What is influenza (the flu)?

Influenza, commonly called “the flu,” is caused by the influenza virus, which infects the respiratory tract (nose, throat, lungs). The flu usually spreads from person to person when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks and the virus is sent into the air. The flu is more likely than other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, to cause severe illness and life-threatening complications.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Symptoms of flu include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny nose, and muscle aches. Children can have additional gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults. Although the term “stomach flu” is sometimes used to describe vomiting, nausea, or diarrhea, these illnesses are caused by certain other viruses, bacteria, or possibly parasites, and are rarely related to influenza in adults.

Does the flu have complications?

Yes. Some of the complications caused by flu can include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children may have sinus problems and ear infections as complications. Those aged 65 years and older and persons of any age with chronic medical conditions are at highest risk for serious complications of flu.

How do I find out if I have the flu?

It is very difficult to distinguish the flu from other viral or bacterial causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. A test can confirm that an illness is influenza if the patient is tested within the first two to three days after symptoms begin. In addition, a doctor’s examination may be needed to determine whether someone has a complication from influenza.

How soon will I get sick if I am exposed to the flu?

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about one to four days, with an average of about two days.

How long is someone who has the flu contagious?

Persons are infectious usually from one day prior to becoming sick to about 5 days after they first develop symptoms. Children may be contagious longer, and some are infectious for 6 days after they become ill.

What can I do to protect myself from the flu?

The single best way to prevent the flu is for individuals, especially persons at high risk for serious complications from the flu, to get the flu vaccine each fall. In the absence of a flu shot, there are still many things people can and should be doing to avoid catching the flu:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially before touching

food, after using the bathroom, and after changing diapers

- Use an antibacterial hand gel for the times you cannot wash your hands with soap and water
- Use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze, throw away the tissue, then wash your hands
- Stay home from work or school if you have flu-like symptoms until 48 hours after the symptoms stop
- As much as possible, stay away from people who have flu-like symptoms
- Eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep
- Wash frequently touched objects, such as door handles, kitchen and bathroom surfaces, drinking fountains, and phone receivers, with a household disinfectant
- Avoid sharing utensils, such as glasses and spoons, and food

Can the flu shot give you the flu?

No. The licensed injectable flu vaccine used in the United States, which is made from inactivated or killed flu viruses, cannot cause the flu and does not cause flu illness.

Can antiviral medications cure the flu?

When started within the first two days of illness, an antiviral medication can reduce the duration of the flu but cannot cure it outright. All antiviral medications must be prescribed by a doctor. These medications are effective against flu viruses, but they are not effective against other viruses or bacteria that can cause symptoms similar to influenza. They also are not effective for treating bacterial infections that can occur as complications of influenza. Antibiotics will not help against the flu because they only work against bacteria and the flu is caused by a virus.

When is the flu season in the United States?

In the United States, the peak of flu season generally occurs anywhere from late December through March. The health impact (infections and death) of a flu season varies from year to year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention monitors circulating flu viruses and their related disease activity and provides influenza reports each week from October through May. Influenza is also monitored in New Hampshire by reports from health care providers, long-term care facilities, and schools, and by reports of flu culture test results from the Public Health Laboratories.

Do other respiratory viruses circulate during the flu season?

In addition to the flu virus, several other respiratory viruses also can circulate during the flu season and can cause symptoms and illness similar to those seen with flu infection. These non-flu viruses include rhinovirus (one cause of the “common cold”) and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), which is the most common cause of severe respiratory illness in young children as well as a leading cause of death from respiratory illness in those aged 65 years and older.

For more information about this influenza or the flu vaccine, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services Communicable Disease Section at 1-603-271-4496 or 1-800 852-3345 x4496. For further information about influenza and the flu season, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov or the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.nh.gov.