

Flu is usually a mild, but uncomfortable disease. You can treat it yourself by staying home and drinking plenty of fluids.

## Influenza

### **What Is Influenza?**

Influenza, often just called the flu, is the most common disease in the world, affecting millions of people each year. Flu is caused by a very transmissible respiratory virus, making it a highly contagious infection. It is characterized by nasal congestion, a sore throat, body aches, fever, and coughing.

The virus that causes the flu mutates easily, which means that it changes from year to year. In any given year, several strains of flu may be circulating in the population. There are more than 200 different strains of the flu. Usually flu epidemics occur during what is called flu season, the late fall and winter months. This is called seasonal flu. Some types of flu virus can strike at any time.

Flu is different from the common cold. The common cold will usually go away in a few days. Cases of the flu can last a week or two. Although fever can accompany the common cold, it is more likely to occur with the flu.

Flu can be either a mild or a serious condition. In mild cases, recovery can be expected within a few days with no complications. In serious infections however, the symptoms may last for much longer and could come with some serious complications.

Symptoms of flu appear two to three days after infection, and can last for up to 14 days.

## What Are the Complications of the Flu?

By itself, the flu is unpleasant but is not generally dangerous. However, it can lead to pneumonia, a serious lung infection. Pneumonia is more likely to develop from flu in people who are elderly (over the age of 65), immunologically compromised, or affected with other diseases such as diabetes. Pneumonia is also more likely to develop from flu in communal dwellings such as nursing homes.

## What Causes Influenza?

Flu can be caused by any of more than 200 strains of influenza virus. Each time you get the flu, you become resistant to that strain of flu virus. However, each year, new strains of the flu virus emerge that find no resistance in your body. This is why you can catch the flu repeatedly.

## Who Is at Risk of Influenza?

Flu is a highly contagious disease, and you can easily catch the virus from an infected person. All people, whether healthy or immunologically weak, can catch the flu virus, but some people at an increased risk. These include:

- ❖ People over 65 years of age
- ❖ Children under 5 years of age
- ❖ Anyone with respiratory problems, heart problems, or weak immune system
- ❖ Pregnant women

## What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Influenza?

The symptoms of flu usually last several days and may include the following:

- ❖ Sore throat
- ❖ Fever over 102°F
- ❖ Headache



- ❖ Muscle aches
- ❖ Fatigue
- ❖ Sneezing
- ❖ Coughing
- ❖ Stuffy or runny nose
- ❖ Vomiting and/or diarrhea (in some cases)

### **How Is Influenza Diagnosed?**

Your doctor will diagnose flu by taking your history and performing a physical examination. He or she may recommend some diagnostic tests such as a throat culture or a chest x-ray to rule out other infections.

### **What Are Common Treatments?**

Because of the high mutation tendencies of influenza virus, no cure has been developed for the flu. The treatment goal is to minimize the symptoms associated with flu and prevent complications. Most healthy people infected with flu will usually recover by resting, drinking plenty of fluids, and taking over-the-counter medications. These make you feel better but do not make you less contagious.

Drinking plenty of fluids is especially important if you have high fever, are vomiting, or have diarrhea. It is easy to become dehydrated under those circumstances.

### **Medications**

- ❖ Antiviral medications: started within a day or so of the start of the flu can make symptoms milder and shorten infection time
- ❖ Expectorants: loosens mucus in your lungs and helps ease your cough
- ❖ Analgesics (aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen): relieve fever and pain. However, do not give aspirin to children because of increased risk of Reye syndrome.
- ❖ Decongestant nasal sprays or saline nasal sprays: relieve nasal congestion
- ❖

It is important to note that antibiotics are not used to treat the flu, but they may be prescribed if you develop bacterial pneumonia as a complication of flu.

## Can Influenza Be Prevented?

You can prevent the risk of flu by improving your overall health: eat healthy foods, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly. If you have the flu, stay home. This is the best way of preventing the spread of flu to your friends and coworkers.

The most important step in preventing the flu is to get vaccinated against it. You have to get a shot each year, since strains of flu vaccine change from year to year. This vaccine is now recommended for everyone over age 6 months. It is strongly recommended for:

- ❖ Children and adults with chronic lung or heart conditions
- ❖ Children and adults with chronic kidney disease and diabetes
- ❖ Adults over 50 years of age
- ❖ Pregnant women
- ❖ People who live in nursing homes
- ❖ Healthcare workers and people who work in nursing homes

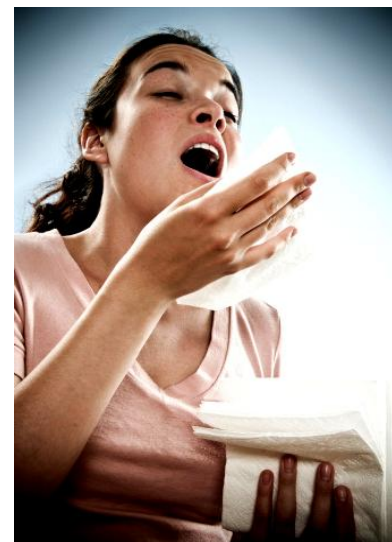
Another important way to avoid contracting the flu is to wash your hands frequently, particularly before meals. Avoid shaking hands!

## Should I Call My Doctor?

Flu is usually a mild, but uncomfortable disease. You can treat it yourself by staying home and drinking plenty of fluids.

However you should consult a health care professional if you or your child has any of these symptoms:

- ❖ High fever (over 103°F)
- ❖ Flu symptoms persisting for 10 or more days
- ❖ Abdominal pain and vomiting
- ❖ Recurring flu-like symptoms
- ❖ Worsening persistent cough
- ❖ A chronic condition
- ❖ Earache or ear drainage
- ❖ Bluish skin color
- ❖ Difficulty in breathing or wheezing
- ❖ Altered mental state, seizures, irritability



You should call your doctor if you have the flu and:

- ❖ Prolonged high fever (over 102°F)
- ❖ Severe fatigue and pain
- ❖ A swollen neck or jaw
- ❖ Worsening sinus pain
- ❖ Severe vomiting
- ❖ Confusion or disorientation
- ❖ Shortness of breath
- ❖ Pain in your chest
- ❖ Fainting
- ❖ Persistent flu-like symptoms that last for 10 or more days

### **For More Information**

For more information, refer to the following medical resources:

<http://www.flu.gov/>

[http://www.emedicinehealth.com/flu\\_in\\_adults/article\\_em.htm](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/flu_in_adults/article_em.htm)

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/flu.html>

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