

Influenza - Factsheet

What is influenza?

Influenza, commonly known as "the flu," is a respiratory illness caused by a virus. There are two main types of influenza virus, A and B. Each type includes many different strains that tend to change each year.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Symptoms usually appear 1 to 4 days after exposure. Influenza symptoms may include headache, fever, chills, cough, sore throat, and body aches. Most people do *not* have diarrhea and vomiting. Although most people are ill for less than a week, some people become seriously ill and may need to go to the hospital.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza may be spread through contact with mucus or droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person, especially when s/he coughs, sneezes, or talks.

How long are people contagious?

The contagious period varies, but adults can probably begin to spread the virus one day before symptoms appear and for a week after their symptoms first appear.

Who gets influenza disease?

Anyone can get the flu. However, in some people it may be more serious. Groups of people who may become more seriously ill include the elderly, infants, people with chronic illnesses (such as lung disease, heart disease, cancer or diabetes), pregnant women, those with weakened immune systems, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and morbidly obese persons. Persons need to be vaccinated *every year* to protect themselves from influenza.

What treatment is available for people with influenza?

Rest, liquids, and over-the-counter medicine are the usual treatments. Those who may become more seriously ill from influenza should see a health care provider as soon as possible for antiviral medications as needed. Since the flu is caused by viruses, *not* by bacteria, antibiotics will not work to treat the patient. Aspirin should not be given to children with influenza because of the possibility of causing a complication called Reye's syndrome.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

People who are sick should stay home until they feel well enough to return and have not had a fever for 24 hours.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting influenza?

- Everyone >6 months of age should receive the annual influenza vaccination.
- Wash hands frequently with water and soap. Teach children to wash their hands too. (Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.)

- Always cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze and then wash your hands.
- In some situations, antiviral medications may be used to prevent or treat the flu - talk to your health care provider for more information.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Encourage people who are sick to stay home.