



INFLUENZA (FLU)

What is the flu?

Influenza, commonly called the “flu”, is an infection of the respiratory tract (nose, throat, airways, and lungs) caused by the influenza virus. Two types of influenza virus, A and B, cause the flu. Although flu is similar in some ways to the common cold, it begins abruptly and symptoms are much more severe than those of a cold.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

The incubation period from time of exposure to the onset of symptoms ranges from 1-4 days. Symptoms usually begin suddenly with high temperature (100 degrees or more), muscle aches, headache, dry cough, and weakness. Sore throat and stuffy nose also may occur. Severe symptoms including fever often last for 3 to 5 days and symptoms such as cough, weakness, and fatigue may persist for several weeks. Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea are uncommon in adults with the flu. The term “stomach flu” is a misnomer since this is not influenza.

How is flu spread?

The influenza virus is very contagious and easily spread from infected persons to others around them. Most commonly, when a person with the flu coughs or sneezes tiny droplets of moisture containing the virus are released into the air to infect others. You can also be infected by handling objects such as paper, computer keyboards, or phones contaminated with the influenza virus. A person with the flu continues to be infectious for 3 to 4 days after symptoms begin. People with the flu should wash their hands frequently and cover their mouths and noses with a tissue when coughing or sneezing to reduce the number of infectious droplets they release into the air.

How is influenza diagnosed?

Quick laboratory tests to diagnose the flu are available at the Health Center. Accurate diagnosis is important since other infections can cause symptoms similar to influenza.

How can I avoid getting the flu?

The most effective way of preventing the flu is getting the influenza vaccine each year. Vaccination prevents 70-90% of infections in healthy young adults. It takes up to 2 weeks after vaccination to develop immunity, so it's best to get vaccinated before flu season begins.

Vaccination is strongly recommended for groups at increased risk of influenza complications such as:

- pregnant women
- those with underlying heart or lung problems including asthma
- other chronic medical conditions such as diabetes
- those over age 50
- young children ages 6 months to 5 years
- Household members and caretakers for those at increased risk listed above

It is also recommended for anyone who wants to reduce their risk of catching the flu.

Whether you have received the vaccine or not you should wash your hands frequently with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.

How is the flu treated?

Antibiotics have no effect on the flu. Influenza is a viral infection and antibiotics work only against bacterial infections. Prescription antiviral medications such as Tamiflu can decrease the duration of severe flu symptoms by about 1 day if started within 48 hours of symptom onset. Antiviral medications are expensive with Tamiflu costing about \$75.

Rest is very important. Persons with influenza should stay home to rest and to avoid exposing others. They should also drink plenty of liquids (water, sports drinks, broth, tea, etc.) to avoid dehydration.

Medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen used according to the package directions may help to reduce fever, muscle aches, and headache. Cough medicine, salt water gargles (1/4 tsp. salt per cup of water) for sore throat, and nasal decongestants may also be helpful for symptomatic relief.

What are the complications of the flu?

Just about everyone who catches the flu feels sick for several days, but most recover fully with rest and symptomatic treatment. A small percentage of people with the flu develop complications which can be serious. These include pneumonia, secondary bacterial sinus and ear infections, as well as worsening of underlying medical problems such as asthma and diabetes. The very young, the very old, and those with underlying medical problems are at greater risk of serious complications.

Should I see a doctor if I have the flu?

Usually not. If you just need a note for an instructor or work, go first to the Nurse Specialty Clinic. You should see one of our practitioners if you have a complication of the flu like those listed below, or you have been ill less than 48 hours and are wondering if you are a candidate for Tamiflu.

If you have questions or need to be seen, call the University Health Center at 346-2770.

Call the Health Center (346-2770) if you have flu symptoms and:

- a fever over 100 degrees for more than 5 days
- a cough which brings up discolored or bloody mucus
- chest pain or shortness of breath
- severe facial pain or earache
- symptoms that don't get better over 7 days or get worse again after getting better

You can learn more about influenza on-line at the Centers for Disease Control:

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm>