

What is Flu? (Influenza)

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each fall.

Every year in the United States, 5% to 20% of the population gets the flu. More than 200,000 people are hospitalized and 36,000 people die from flu complications. People at highest risk for serious flu complications are older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions.

SYMPTOMS OF FLU INCLUDE:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Gastro-intestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, are much more common among children than adults.

Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections.

How Flu Spreads

The flu spreads in respiratory droplets caused by coughing and sneezing. It usually spreads from person to person, though occasionally a person may become infected by touching something with virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

Adults may be able to infect others beginning one day **before** getting symptoms and up to 7 days **after** getting sick. **That means that you can give someone the flu before you know you're sick as well as while you are sick.**

Follow these recommendations to prevent the spread of germs:

- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, and wash hands afterward to prevent spreading germs to objects like doorknobs and other household items;
- Get plenty of rest, eat properly and dress appropriately for the weather;
- Minimize time in crowded areas during the flu season, when the risk of exposure to germs is increased; and,
- Avoid contact with others when you have the flu.

Preventing the Flu: Get a Flu Vaccine

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each fall.

There are two types of vaccines:

- The flu shot -- an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. **The flu shot** is approved for use in people 6 months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine -- a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”). LAIV is approved for use in healthy people 2 years to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies that provide protection against influenza virus infection develop in the body.

Who Should Not Be Vaccinated

- People who have a severe allergy to eggs
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past
- People who developed Guillain-Barre’ syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine previously
- Children younger than 6 months of age
- People who are sick with a fever (These people can get vaccinated once their symptoms lessen.)