

## **What is Influenza (also called Flu)?**

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu [vaccine](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm) each year.

## **Signs and Symptoms of Flu**

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:

- Fever\* or feeling feverish/chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue (very tired)
- Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

*\*It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.*

## **How Flu Spreads**

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or possibly their nose.

## **Period of Contagiousness**

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day **before** symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days **after** becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time.

## **Onset of Symptoms**

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1 to 4 days, with an average of about 2 days.

## **Complications of Flu**

[Complications of flu\(<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/complications.htm#complications>\)](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/complications.htm#complications) can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

## **People at High Risk from Flu**

Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people), and serious problems related to the flu can happen at any age, but [some people are at high risk of developing serious flu-related complications\(\[http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/high\\\_risk.htm\]\(http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/high\_risk.htm\)\)](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/high_risk.htm) if they get sick. This includes people 65 years and older, people of any age with certain chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), pregnant women, and young children.

## **Preventing Flu**

The first and most important step in preventing flu is to get a flu vaccination each year. CDC also recommends everyday preventive actions (like staying away from people who are sick, covering coughs and sneezes and frequent handwashing) to help slow the spread of germs that cause respiratory (nose, throat, and lungs) illnesses, like flu.

## **Diagnosing Flu**

It is very difficult to distinguish the flu from other viral or bacterial causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. There are tests available to diagnose flu. For more information, see [Diagnosing Flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/testing.htm)(<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/testing.htm>).

## **Treating**

There are [influenza antiviral drugs](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/antivirals/whatyoushould.htm)(<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/antivirals/whatyoushould.htm>) that can be used to treat flu illness.

For more information, see “[Seasonal Influenza, More Information](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/disease.htm)(<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/disease.htm>).”

- Page last reviewed: August 25, 2016
- Page last updated: August 25, 2016