

# Influenza Disease

Updated August 2024

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### What is the flu?

Influenza (commonly known as flu) is a contagious illness of the respiratory system. Influenza viruses infect the nose, throat and lungs. It spreads mainly through respiratory droplets from one person to another when someone coughs, sneezes or talks. It can also be spread when someone touches a surface or object that has the flu virus on it and then touches their own mouth, nose or eyes.

There are two main types of flu viruses: Types A and B. These are the viruses that spread often and are responsible for the seasonal flu epidemics each year.

### Is the flu serious?

Yes, the flu is highly contagious and can be very serious. Once infected, you may be able to spread it to other people before you know you're sick. Every year in the U.S. seasonal flu causes thousands of hospital admissions and deaths.

### Who is most at risk for serious complications from the flu?

Some people are at higher risk of serious health problems when they get the flu. This includes pregnant women, infants, the elderly and people with medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, neurological and neuromuscular conditions and weakened immune systems.

### How does the flu spread?

The flu virus is in the wet spray (droplets of saliva and mucus) that comes out of the nose and mouth of someone who coughs or sneezes. If you are close enough to a person with the flu (3 – 6 feet) when they cough or sneeze, you can breathe in the virus and get sick.

People are most contagious in the first three to four days after they start feeling sick. Healthy adults may be able to infect others up to one day before symptoms develop and for as long as five to seven days after becoming sick.

### What are the symptoms of the flu?

Symptoms from the flu can range from mild to severe. The flu is different from the common cold and usually comes on suddenly. Symptoms can begin anywhere from one to four days after being infected. Flu symptoms can include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Fatigue

- Vomiting and diarrhea (more common in children than adults)

### How do I prevent the seasonal flu?

The best and most effective way to prevent seasonal flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year. The vaccine reduces sickness and the risk of serious complications that can result in hospitalization or death.

Everyone should take everyday preventive measures to avoid contracting and spreading the flu. Good hygiene practices, like frequent handwashing and covering coughs and sneezes, help slow the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses.

### Who should get the flu vaccine?

Everyone 6 months of age and older should be vaccinated for the flu. The only exceptions are people with a severe allergy to something in the vaccine. It is especially important that people in certain high-risk groups get a flu shot every year:

- Children aged 6 months through 18 years, especially those on long-term aspirin therapy
- People 50 years of age and older
- Pregnant and postpartum women
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, neurologic and neuromuscular conditions and weakened immune systems
- People with muscle and nerve disorders that make it difficult to breath or swallow
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- Anyone who might transmit the flu to someone at risk. For example, health care workers, including those in training, emergency response workers, direct care staff, people who live with or care for anyone on the list above, and people who live with or care for infants under 6 months of age, including parents, siblings and daycare providers.

### Is the flu vaccine safe?

Flu vaccines are safe and effective and the best way to prevent spreading seasonal flu.

CDC conducts studies each year to determine effectiveness of flu vaccines. Recent studies have shown that the flu illness is reduced by 40 to 60 percent for those who receive the vaccine.

While it's still possible to get the flu even if you are vaccinated, your risk of hospitalization and serious complications decreases with vaccine protection. By being vaccinated, you can also help slow the spread of the virus and offer more protection to people around you, especially the elderly and immune compromised.

The flu vaccine cannot give you the flu. Most people do not experience any side effects from the vaccine, but some people may have mild effects, including:

- Soreness at the injection site
- Mild headache
- Fever

- Muscle aches
- Nausea
- Fatigue

### How do I know if I have the flu?

If you have fever with cough or sore throat, you may have the flu.

If you think you have the flu, stay home from work and school and avoid contact with others so you do not spread the virus. If you think you might have flu and you need to see your doctor, call ahead and let them know you might have the flu. That way, your doctor's office can take steps to avoid the spread of flu to others. The doctor may recommend that you be tested for the flu.

It is a good idea to keep careful records of the vaccines you receive so you will know when you need another. If you are 65 years of age or older and you are not sure if you have ever received the pneumococcal vaccination, you should be vaccinated.

### Other steps to protect against getting the flu

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into the inside of your elbow if you don't have a tissue. Throw tissues away and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Use household cleaners to clean things that are touched often, like doorknobs, toys, and phones.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick. Try to stay at least three to six feet from someone who is sick with the flu.
- People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid crowds, if possible.
- Stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness (fever with cough or sore throat) and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin). For most people this will mean staying at home for about four days.

### How can I take care of someone who is sick with the flu?

Caring for someone sick is available online at: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/treatment/caring-for-someone.htm>. This site gives you information to help you care for someone who has the flu in your home.

### Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, a community pharmacist or your local public health unit.
- The State of Louisiana Fight the Flu website at: [www.lah.gov/FightTheFlu](http://www.lah.gov/FightTheFlu).
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [cdc.gov/flu](http://cdc.gov/flu)

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have questions about the disease described above or think that you may have this infection, consult a health care provider.*

## **Louisiana Department of Health Immunization Program**

1450 Poydras Street, Suite 1938

New Orleans, LA 70112

Phone: (504) 568-2600

Fax: (504) 568-2659