

# Fact Sheet: Flu (Influenza)

## What is influenza?

It is a highly infectious viral illness, and is commonly called “the flu”. Influenza viruses infect the respiratory tract and compared with most other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, influenza often causes a more severe illness.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear within 1 to 4 days after being infected and include sudden onset of:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body and muscle aches
- Headache
- Extreme fatigue
- Sometimes vomiting and diarrhea (more often in children than adults)

Most people who get the flu recover completely in 1 to 2 weeks, but some people develop serious and potentially life threatening complications, such as pneumonia. Flu-related complications can occur at any age; however, the elderly, people with chronic health problems, pregnant women and young children are much more likely to develop serious complications after influenza infection.

## How is it spread?

Viruses that cause flu are spread by direct contact with respiratory droplets (i.e., coughing and sneezing). Flu viruses enter the body through the mucous membranes of the eyes, nose or mouth. Those at highest risk for infection live in densely populated areas, crowded living situations, or attend school.

## What is the treatment?

- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration (i.e., water, juice, and tea).
- Take non-aspirin medication for fever and body aches.
- Antiviral medicine like oseltamavir (Tamiflu) can decrease symptoms if taken soon after getting ill. If you suspect you have the flu, call your health care provider and ask if you need an antiviral drug.

## How is it prevented?

Vaccine is the best way to prevent influenza. Vaccine is recommended for everyone 6 months and older every year. The vaccine protects against 3 or 4 strains of the influenza virus. Sometimes, an unpredicted new strain may appear after the vaccine has been made and distributed. Even if someone becomes infected with the new strain of influenza, the vaccine may still provide some protection and lessen symptoms.

Additional prevention measures:

- Wash hands frequently, especially after coughing, sneezing and handling used tissues.
- Avoid close contact with those who have cold or flu-like symptoms.
- After contact with a person who is ill, wash your hands and keep your fingers away from your eyes, nose, and mouth to prevent the spread of the virus.
- Boost your immune system by eating a healthy diet, and getting regular physical activity and plenty of rest.

*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. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*