

Fact Sheet: Flu (Influenza)

What is influenza?

It is a disease caused by a virus that infects the respiratory tract, and is commonly called “the flu”. Compared with most other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, influenza infection often causes a more severe illness.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear within 2 to 4 days after being infected and include:

- Fever (usually 100.5 F to 103.5 F in adults and often even higher in children)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Headache and muscle aches
- Extreme fatigue

Most people who get the flu recover completely in 1 to 2 weeks, but some people develop serious and potentially life threatening medical 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, are in 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.

How is it prevented?

The best way to prevent influenza is to be vaccinated against it. The influenza vaccine is made from inactivated (killed) influenza viruses each flu season; the vaccine will boost the immune system’s ability to fight various flu viruses. There is also a flu vaccine available as a nasal spray which is a weakened form of the live virus. Sometimes, an unpredicted new strain may appear after the vaccine has been made and distributed. Even if someone does become infected with the new strain of influenza, the disease symptoms may be milder because the vaccine may provide some protection. You cannot get the flu from the flu vaccine.

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 call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

