

Influenza

FACTSHEET

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What is Influenza?

Influenza, commonly called "the flu," is a contagious disease caused by the influenza virus. Compared to the common cold, influenza infection often causes a more severe illness. The illness usually occurs October to May each year.

What are the symptoms of Influenza?

Typical influenza illness includes fever (usually 100°F to 102°F in adults and possibly higher in children) and respiratory symptoms, such as dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, as well as headache, muscle aches, and often-extreme fatigue. Although nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can sometimes accompany influenza infection, especially in children, these symptoms are rarely the primary symptoms. The term "stomach flu" is a misnomer that is sometimes used to describe gastrointestinal illnesses caused by organisms other than influenza viruses. Remember influenza is a respiratory illness not a stomach or intestinal disease.

Who gets Influenza?

Anyone can get influenza, but the elderly, the very young and those with chronic health conditions are most at risk to develop influenza and develop complications afterwards. Complications can include pneumonia, bronchitis and sinus and ear infections. Influenza may make chronic health conditions such as heart and lung disease worse.

How is Influenza spread?

The influenza virus is usually spread person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes and sends the virus into the air and another person inhales the virus.

What is the incubation period?

Symptoms start 1 to 4 days after the virus enters the body. Adults can pass the virus to others for approximately 3 to 7 days once symptoms start. Children may spread the virus for longer than 7 days.

Are there any vaccines for Influenza?

There are vaccines for Influenza. They come in the form of a shot or nasal spray. Children as young as 6 months old can receive the flu shot and children as young as 5 yrs old can take the nasal spray. Talk to your doctor about which is best for you. If you are

not able to get vaccinated for Influenza and are exposed to someone with Influenza ask your healthcare provider about medications called "antivirals". Antivirals are a group of medications taken after you are exposed to Influenza. They may decrease your chance of developing Influenza. Your healthcare provider is best suited to decide if these medications are appropriate for you.

What other medications can I take?

A virus causes influenza so antibiotics will not cure this illness. If you develop influenza you should drink plenty of fluid, rest, and avoid alcohol. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about medications that may treat the symptoms of the flu.

Are there any medications I should avoid?

Never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms –particularly fever– without first speaking to your doctor. Giving aspirin to children and teenagers who have influenza can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye Syndrome. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before you take any over the counter medication if you are already taking medication for a medical condition.

What can be done to prevent the spread of Influenza?

There are some steps to decrease the risk of getting sick:

- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze.
- Frequent hand washing, especially after coughing or sneezing
- eat well and get plenty of rest.
- If you become ill, stay home from work or school while you are having symptoms otherwise you may infect others.

Want more information?

Information about Influenza and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call (202) 442-9371.

