

# Influenza

**Influenza**, commonly known as the flu, is a contagious viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs. It comes on suddenly and typically strikes during the winter.

- ◆ Common symptoms include fever, shaking chills, body aches, headache and fatigue. These symptoms typically last three to four days, while a cough, runny nose or sore throat can persist for another week.
- ◆ There are two different viruses that cause the flu: Influenza A and B. Type A is usually responsible for large outbreaks and is a constantly changing virus. New strains of Type A virus develop regularly and cause new epidemics every few years. Type B causes smaller outbreaks.
- ◆ The flu can be spread through small droplets that form when a person sneezes or coughs, or through direct contact with an infected person.
- ◆ The flu shot is recommended for people with high risk factors for catching the virus. This includes people over 65 years old or less than four years old, people with chronic lung or heart conditions and people who regularly come into contact with those at risk. The vaccine is 60-70 percent effective in preventing infection.
- ◆ The flu vaccine is usually scarce, and cannot be provided to everyone. It does not protect against all strains of the virus.
- ◆ The virus will usually go away within seven to ten days. Home treatment includes bed rest and increased fluid intake. Several medications are available by prescription to prevent and reduce the severity of the flu. There are also over-the-counter medications that can lessen the symptoms.

***Want more information? Ask your pharmacist.***



# Influenza

Influenza, commonly known as the flu, is an acute contagious respiratory infection caused by either the Influenza A or B virus. Influenza usually occurs in the winter, and takes about 20,000 lives annually in the U.S. The disease spreads primarily through inhalation of infectious aerosols, and can also be spread through direct personal contact.

The incubation period of influenza is about one to three days, and the acute course of the illness typically lasts less than a week. Symptoms include fever, chills, muscle ache, headache, cough, sore throat and fatigue.

Most patients will recover on their own without treatment. However, the illness occasionally leads to bacterial infections such as ear infections, sinus infections or bronchitis. Pneumonia is a less common but more serious complication. The Influenza A virus is treatable with the antiviral drugs amantadine and rimantadine. Zanamivir and oseltamivir can be used to treat both Influenza A and B. Acetaminophen, guaifenesin and other over-the-counter medications can alleviate some of the discomfort due to the symptoms of influenza.

The flu can be prevented by vaccination. The vaccine is offered first to patients over the

age of 65 or under the age of four, and patients with underlying conditions such as cardiac, pulmonary, renal or hepatic diseases. Health-care workers and others who are in frequent contact with high-risk patients should also receive the vaccine. Vaccination of the general public can be used to prevent an epidemic.

This winter, there has been an increase in both the number of reported cases of influenza and in the number of requested flu shots. These two factors have led to a shortage of the vaccine in many areas of the country. Another complication is that the vaccine that is currently available may not be very effective in preventing the strain of the virus now affecting the nation. Due to this shortage, patients should be advised that the prescription drugs amantadine, rimantadine and oseltamivir can also be used to prevent influenza.

In addition, FluMist™, Influenza Virus Vaccine Live, administered intranasally, is available. FluMist™ is made from a live, attenuated virus, whereas the flu shot is made using a killed virus. FluMist™ contains the same three strains of influenza virus as the inactivated vaccine, those that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration selected as the most likely to cause influenza in the coming flu season.

