



Influenza:

'Tis The Sneezin'?

What is influenza (flu)?

Flu is an upper respiratory viral illness. It causes fever, head/body aches, fatigue, loss of appetite, dry cough and sore throat. Symptoms last one to two weeks. Most people recover without problems. Sometimes it can lead to a bacterial infection, such as ear infection or pneumonia. The very young, the very old and people with serious medical problems are at increased risk for these complications.

The flu is caused by influenza viruses type A and B. Type A usually causes the outbreaks that occur. The viruses constantly change, causing the flu to differ from year to year. The term "flu" is often misused to describe any mild illness that has flu-like symptoms (such as the common cold or a stomach virus). The flu is a specific illness, and it tends to occur in late fall and winter. The common cold occurs anytime, and is usually caused by rhinoviruses. Its symptoms include sore throat, nasal congestion, sneezing, runny nose and cough. It may also cause fever, head/body aches and fatigue. Both the flu and common cold are transmitted by coming into contact with someone who has the illness.

How is influenza treated?

Over-the-counter (OTC) products are usually all that is needed for flu symptoms, including:

- pain reliever/fever reducer—acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (e.g., Advil®) to help relieve sore throat pain, fever, and head/body aches. Benzocaine lozenges (e.g., Cepacol®) help relieve sore throat pain.
- decongestant—phenylephrine by mouth (e.g., Sudafed PE™) or nasal spray (e.g., Afrin®) can help relieve a stuffy nose.
- cough suppressant—dextromethorphan (e.g., Vicks 44) can help a dry cough.
- flu remedies—some OTC products contain multiple ingredients, such as TheraFlu® Flu, Cold & Cough (contains phenylephrine, acetaminophen, and dextromethorphan).

Getting extra rest and drinking lots of fluids also helps. Prescription antiviral medicines can reduce the duration and severity of symptoms. They are useful for people at risk of complications from the flu. They should be started within two days of onset of symptoms to be effective.

When should people with influenza contact their doctor?

People should contact their doctor if any of the following situations occur:

- Symptoms include shortness of breath, temperature over 101° F, chills, or cough that produces mucus from lungs.
- Symptoms improve but seem to be getting worse again.
- Signs of bacterial infection (ear infection, pneumonia) develop.
- Influenza develops in a person who: is older than 65 years; has other health problems (lung, heart or kidney disease or diabetes); is being treated with chemotherapy for cancer; or has a long-term respiratory illness, such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Can influenza be prevented?

The flu vaccine (or "flu shot") can help prevent the flu. It is given yearly (ideally in October or November) by injection. It is for anyone older than six months. It is recommended for:

- anyone age six to 23 months or 50 years and older.
- individuals two years and older who have health conditions such as asthma or a chronic heart disorder.
- women who will be pregnant during the flu season.
- close contacts of anyone in a high-risk category (includes children younger than 23 months of age).

FluMist® is an alternative to the flu shot for healthy people five to 49 years old, except pregnant women. FluMist® should not be given to close contacts of people with severely impaired immune systems (e.g., people who had a recent bone marrow transplant) to avoid their transmitting the virus after being vaccinated.

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

