



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND
MENTAL HYGIENE
Thomas A. Farley, MD, MPH
Commissioner

Facts about Flu (Influenza)

Influenza is a viral infection of the nose, throat, bronchial tubes and lungs. There are two main types of virus: influenza A and influenza B. Each type includes many different strains, which tend to change each year. Seasonal influenza sometimes causes severe illness or complications, but the great majority of people recover fully without any medical treatment.

When does influenza occur?

Influenza is most common during the fall and winter months. Flu activity often increases during the late fall and early winter in the United States, but peak levels generally occur between late December and early March. Illnesses resembling influenza may occur during the summer months but they are usually due to other viruses.

Who gets influenza?

Anyone can get influenza, but it is most serious in the elderly, in young children, in people with chronic underlying health conditions such as asthma, diabetes or a weakened immune system.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza is highly contagious and is easily transmitted through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person during coughing and sneezing.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Typical symptoms include fever, chills, aches, cough and sore throat. Intestinal symptoms, such as vomiting or diarrhea, are possible but uncommon. Although most people are ill for only a few days, influenza sometimes leads to more serious illness, such as pneumonia. Influenza-related illness, including pneumonia, causes approximately 36,000 deaths in the United States each year. Here in New York City, influenza causes an estimated 1,100 deaths, and respiratory infections cause more than 2,000.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

Influenza generally occurs within 1 to 4 days after exposure.

How is influenza diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose influenza by checking for common symptoms such as fever, chills, aches, cough and sore throat. Lab tests are sometimes used to confirm the diagnosis, but these tests are not necessary or useful in most instances.

What should I do if you I get flu-like symptoms?

Most people recover from flu on their own, without medical treatment. They don't need to go to the hospital, but they do need to take steps to avoid spreading the infection. If you have a fever (100 degrees or higher), plus a cough or sore throat, be sure to take these steps:

- Stay home from work or school. Don't return until you have been free of fever for 24 hours.
- Avoid close contact with other people. Stay away from crowded public places and avoid close face-to-face contact with household members.
- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze
- Wash your hands often.

When should I call a doctor?

Some people are more likely than others to get very sick with the flu. People who have flu-like symptoms or have had recent close contact with someone with flu-like symptoms should call a health care provider if they belong to any of these higher risk groups:

- Pregnant women
- Women who have given birth, or had a miscarriage or abortion in the past 2 weeks
- People younger than 2 or 65 and older
- People with any of these medical conditions:

Health Conditions that Increase the Risk of Severe Influenza

- ✓ Asthma or any other chronic respiratory diseases
- ✓ Heart, kidney or liver disease
- ✓ Hematologic diseases, such as sickle cell anemia
- ✓ Metabolic disorders, such as diabetes
- ✓ Weakened immune system, from illness or medication
- ✓ Neuromuscular disorders that interfere with breathing or the discharge of mucus
- ✓ Long-term aspirin therapy in people under 19

What is the treatment for influenza?

Rest and liquids are usually adequate, but antiviral medication can help prevent severe illness and complications in people at high risk. Four antiviral drugs – amantadine, rimantidine, zanamivir and oseltamivir – are available by prescription.

When should I go to the hospital?

Go to the hospital or call 911 right away if you have trouble breathing or experience any of these other severe symptoms:

- Pain or pressure in the chest or stomach
- Dizziness or confusion
- Increasing fever or vomiting that won't stop
- Can't eat or drink

- Extreme irritability (in a child)

How can I protect myself from influenza?

Getting vaccinated is the best way to avoid influenza. Influenza vaccines (flu shots) are available from private health care providers, from Health Department immunization clinics, and from most pharmacies.

Does past infection with influenza make a person immune?

The viruses that cause influenza frequently change, so people who have been infected or immunized in previous years may become infected with a new strain. To maintain your immunity, you need to get a seasonal influenza vaccine every year.

Who should get vaccinated against seasonal influenza?

- Pregnant women
- All health care workers
- Anyone 6 months through 18 years of age
- Anyone 19 through 49 years of age who has an underlying health condition that increases risk (see boxed checklist above)
- Adults 50 and older
- Anyone who lives with or cares for children less than 5 years old, especially infants younger than 6 months