



The Flu (Influenza)

What Is the Flu?

The flu is an infection of the respiratory tract (nose, throat, and lungs). It's caused by a virus that spreads easily from person to person. Flu viruses usually cause the most illness during the colder months of the year. In the United States, flu season is from October to May.

What Are the Signs & Symptoms of the Flu?

When people have the flu, they usually feel worse than they do when they have a cold. Kids who get sick with the flu usually get symptoms about 2 days after they were in contact with the flu virus. They might have:

- a fever that comes on suddenly
- chills
- headache
- muscle aches
- dizziness
- loss of appetite
- tiredness
- a cough
- sore throat
- runny nose
- nausea or vomiting
- weakness
- ear pain
- diarrhea

Babies with the flu also may suddenly seem fussy or just "not look right."

What Causes the Flu?

The flu gets its name from the virus that causes it — the influenza (in-floo-EN-zuh) virus. It spreads when people cough or sneeze out droplets infected with the virus and other people breathe them in. The droplets also can land on things like doorknobs or shopping carts, infecting people who touch those.

Is the Flu Contagious?

The flu is very contagious. People can spread it from a day before they feel sick until their symptoms are gone. This is about 1 week for adults, but it can be longer for young kids.

The flu usually happens in annual epidemics. An **epidemic** is when an illness spreads quickly and infects lots of people in an area at the same time. Some years the epidemic is more severe and widespread than others. An epidemic that spreads worldwide is called a **pandemic**. This is far less common. There were three influenza pandemics in the 20th century, and one so far in the 21st century, in 2009 with influenza A (H1N1).

During the coronavirus pandemic, experts found that wearing masks can help protect the community from the spread of germs. They recommended that all children age 2 and up wear a mask when out in public or around people who don't live with them. Wearing masks can also help stop the spread of flu.

How Is the Flu Diagnosed?

Often, how a child looks is enough for health care providers to diagnose the flu. Kids who have it usually look ill and miserable.

Other infections can cause symptoms similar to the flu. So if health care providers need to be sure that someone has influenza, they might do a test. They'll take a sample of mucus by wiping a long cotton swab inside the nose or throat. Results might be ready quickly, or can take longer if the test is sent to a lab.

How Is the Flu Treated?

Most people with flu get better at home. Make sure your child:

- drinks lots of liquids to prevent dehydration
- gets plenty of sleep and takes it easy
- takes acetaminophen and/or ibuprofen to relieve fever and aches. Don't give kids or teens aspirin because of its link to Reye syndrome.
- wears layers that are easy to put on or remove. Kids might feel cold one minute and hot the next.

Children with the flu should stay home from school and childcare until they feel better. They should go back only when they haven't had a fever for at least 24 hours without using a fever-reducing medicine. Some kids need to stay home longer. Ask the doctor what's best for your child.

Doctors may prescribe antiviral medicine for a very ill child or kids are at risk for more serious symptoms. The medicine can shorten the flu by 1–2 days. It works best if children start taking it within 48 hours of the start of the flu. If a doctor prescribes antiviral medicine for your child, ask about any possible side effects. Doctors won't prescribe antibiotics for the flu. Antibiotics work only against bacteria, not viruses.

What Problems Can Happen?

Some people are more likely to have problems when they get the flu, including:

- kids up to the age of 5, especially babies
- people with a weak immune system from medicines (such as chemotherapy or long-term steroid use) or illnesses (like HIV infection or cancer)
- people with chronic (long-term) medical conditions, such as asthma or diabetes
- kids and teens who take aspirin regularly
- people who are very obese
- women who are pregnant, trying to get pregnant, just had a baby, or are breastfeeding
- people who live in long-term care facilities, such as nursing homes
- people 65 years and older
- American Indians and Alaska Natives

If they get the flu, their illness can be more serious. They can develop pneumonia or get even sicker from other kinds of infections (like bacterial infections). If this happens, many will need medical care in the hospital. So it's important for them not to be near anyone who has the flu or flu-like symptoms.

People who have flu symptoms should keep their distance from anyone who might get very sick if they catch the flu.

How Long Does the Flu Last?

Fever and other flu symptoms often go away after a week or so, but some people may still have a cough or feel weak for longer than that.

Can the Flu Be Prevented?

There's no guaranteed way to avoid the flu. But getting the flu vaccine every year can help. Everyone 6 months of age and older should get it each year. It's even more important during the 2020-2021 flu season as the coronavirus pandemic continues because:

- Doctor's offices, hospitals, and urgent care centers will likely be busy caring for many people with COVID-19 this flu season. Preventing flu in your family will help you avoid needing medical care when health care providers are under so much strain. Fewer doctor visits mean fewer chances of exposure to other illnesses, such as COVID-19.
- Health experts worry that people who get the flu and COVID-19 at the same time might have a more serious illness.
- Flu and COVID-19 cause similar symptoms. If someone in your family has symptoms such as fever and cough, they may need to get tested for coronavirus or to isolate at home. Even if that person has a negative coronavirus test, the doctor still might recommend isolating at home for up to 10 days. Preventing the flu and its symptoms means that your family will be less likely to need testing or to isolate at home.

In the U.S., most doctor's offices, clinics, and drugstores offer the flu vaccine from September through the spring. It's best to get it before the end of October so that it provides protection before the flu starts spreading in the community. But even if you don't get it at the start of the flu season, it's not too late to get one while the flu is still going around.

If your child is sick, has a fever, or is wheezing, talk to your doctor to see if you need to reschedule the flu vaccine.

What Else Can Help?

To make spreading the flu less likely, everyone in your family should:

- Wash hands well and often with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing, and before eating or preparing food.
- Never pick up used tissues.
- Never share cups and eating utensils.
- Stay home from work or school if they have the flu.
- Cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when they cough or sneeze, then put it in the trash.
- Cough or sneeze into their upper arm, not their hands, if a tissue isn't handy.

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