

Influenza or “flu” is a respiratory illness caused by a flu virus. Flu viruses spread each fall, winter, and spring.

Influenza (Flu)

Young (infants) and the very old are most at risk for severe illness from seasonal flu. In the U.S., about 3,000 to 49,000 people die yearly from seasonal flu. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone age 6 months and older get a flu shot each year.

Flu spreads easily between people and can live for up to 2 days on surfaces such as doorknobs, tabletops, and counters.

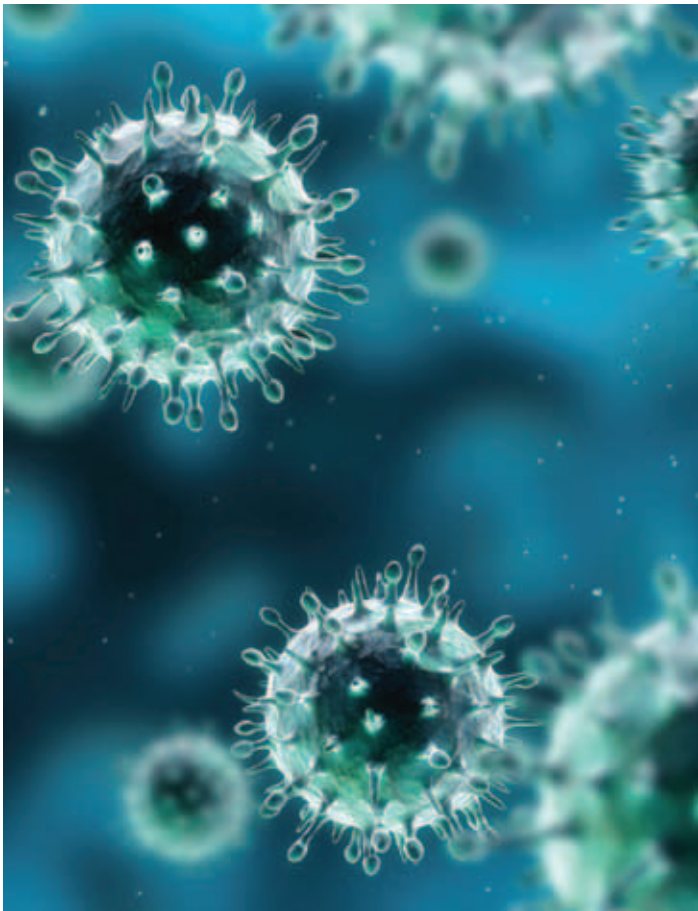
How is it spread?

The flu virus spreads easily. For example, when a person with the flu sneezes, coughs, talks, or laughs, the flu virus can spread into the air as droplets from their mouth or nose. These droplets can spread to people and surfaces within 6 feet.

The flu virus can spread to your hands if you touch anything that has the virus on it. If you then touch your eyes, nose, or mouth, you can get the flu.

The flu virus can live on surfaces, such as countertops and door knobs, for 24 to 48 hours.

Seasonal flu is contagious from 1 day before any signs appear to up to 5 days after you get sick.



Model of flu virus particles.

What are signs of flu?

- ◆ Fever (usually 102°F or higher).
- ◆ Chills.
- ◆ Cough.
- ◆ Runny or stuffy nose.
- ◆ Sore throat.
- ◆ Tiredness.
- ◆ Headache.
- ◆ Muscle or body aches.
- ◆ Stomach symptoms (mostly in children).

How do you know if you the flu?

Your health care provider can examine and test you for the flu virus.

How is it treated?

Your health care provider may treat you with antiviral drugs. Antiviral drugs are most effective if taken within the first two days of being sick.

If you have the flu, how can you feel better?

- ◆ Get plenty of rest.
- ◆ Take over-the-counter drugs. **Note:** not all over-the-counter drugs are safe for children. Find more on drugs safe to give children at: www.cdc.gov/getsmart/antibiotic-use/symptom-relief.html#d.
- ◆ Use a clean humidifier to help a dry, scratchy throat.
- ◆ Soothe a sore throat with ice chips, sore throat spray, or lozenges (do not give lozenges to young children).
- ◆ Gargle with warm salt water.
- ◆ Eat plain foods that are easy on the stomach.

People with severe illness from the flu should talk to their health care provider about taking antiviral drugs if they get the flu.

What can happen if the flu gets worse?

Most people with the flu will not need medical care or antiviral drugs. Most will recover in less than two weeks. Even healthy people can have severe illness from the flu. Adults should get medical help right away if they develop:

- ◆ Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath, or blueish skin color.
- ◆ Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen.
- ◆ Sudden dizziness.
- ◆ Confusion.
- ◆ Difficulty waking up.
- ◆ Severe or continued vomiting.
- ◆ Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough.

Over time, flu can lead to:

- ◆ Pneumonia.
- ◆ Bronchitis.
- ◆ Sinus and ear infections.



Illness from flu can also make other health problems worse. People with asthma may have more asthma attacks. People with heart problems may get worse. Flu can cause severe illness and even death in:

- ◆ Children younger than 5, especially those younger than age 2.
- ◆ Adults 65 years of age and older.
- ◆ Pregnant women.
- ◆ People who have medical conditions including:
 - Asthma.
 - Diseases of the brain or muscles such as brain injury, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, and stroke.
 - Chronic lung disease, such as emphysema (COPD) and cystic fibrosis.
 - Heart disease.
 - Blood diseases such as sickle cell disease.
 - Gland diseases such as diabetes.
 - Kidney diseases.
 - Liver diseases.
 - Weak immune systems due to disease or medicines, such as people with HIV/ AIDS, cancer, or those on chronic steroids.
 - People younger than 19 years of age who are taking aspirin pills long-term.
- ◆ People who are obese.
- ◆ American Indians and Alaskan Natives.

These people should alert their health care provider if they get signs of the flu. They may need early treatment.

Use this flow-chart to help decide how to best handle the flu: www.publichealth.va.gov/docs/flu/flu_selfassess_flowchart.pdf

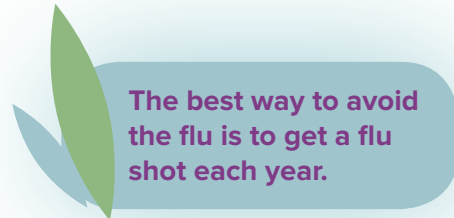
If you have the flu:

- ◆ Clean your hands often with soap and water or alcohol hand rub.
- ◆ Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into your sleeve.
- ◆ Do not share eating or drinking utensils, hand towels, or toothpaste.
- ◆ Stay home until 24 hours after their fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities.
- ◆ Avoid contact with others.
- ◆ Drink plenty of fluids, such as water, herbal teas, broths, and sports drinks.




How can you avoid the flu?

- ◆ **GET A FLU SHOT each year.** Everyone 6 months of age and older should get a flu shot each year because flu virus can change from one year to the next.
- ◆ Clean hands and surfaces often.
- ◆ Limit or avoid contact with people who are sick.



What about pregnancy?

Flu can be severe in pregnant women. Get your flu shot. Pregnant women should let their health care provider know if they have any signs of flu. Pregnant women should not take over-the-counter drugs without asking their provider first. The flu shot is safe for pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy.



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For more on the flu see:

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):

Seasonal Flu

www.publichealth.va.gov/flu

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

Seasonal Influenza (Flu)

www.cdc.gov/flu

2009 H1N1 Flu ("Swine Flu") and You

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/qa.htm

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS):

What You Should Know about Flu Antiviral Drugs

www.flu.gov/news/blogs/blog20110211.html

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID/NIH):

Flu (Influenza)

www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/Flu/understandingFlu/Pages/default.aspx