

## DESCRIPTION

A contagious infection caused by viruses that affect the nose, throat, and lungs. Influenza (flu) outbreaks typically occur in the late fall and winter with varying degrees of severity.

## FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Chills and moderate-to-high fever.
- Headache.
- Muscle aches, including backache.
- Dry cough.
- Sore throat.
- Runny or stuffy nose.
- Fatigue.

## CAUSES

The virus germs are spread when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or speaks. The germs get into the air, and nearby persons breathe in the germs. Flu can also be spread by touching a surface that has the germs on it and then touching your nose or mouth.

Unfortunately, you may be contagious before you develop symptoms or are aware that you are ill. Adults are contagious 1 day before symptoms and up to 7 days after getting sick. Children may be contagious for longer than 7 days. Symptoms start 1 to 5 days after exposure.

## RISK INCREASES WITH

- Crowded places during an epidemic.
- Students in schools.
- Children and the elderly.
- Nursing homes or long-term care centers.
- Recent illness that has lowered resistance.
- Smokers.
- Chronic illness, such as chronic lung or heart disease.
- Weak immune system due to illness or drugs.

## PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Have a yearly influenza vaccine injection or a nasal spray flu vaccine. A different vaccine is made every year because strains of the virus change from year to year. Sometimes, an unpredicted new strain appears and you may still get the flu, but it is usually a milder case. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions.
- Some antiviral drugs may also help in preventing flu.
- Wash hands often with soap and water to prevent the spread of any germs.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol based hand sanitizer.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Most people who get the flu get better in a week. A cough or tired feeling may last a little longer. Elderly persons, children 6 months to 23 months, pregnant women, and people with chronic illnesses are more at risk for complications.

## POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Pneumonia, dehydration, or worsening of a chronic illness. Children may develop sinus problems or ear infections.

## GENERAL MEASURES

- Most people who get the flu will use self-care methods at home. See your health care provider if symptoms are more severe, cause any concern, or you are at risk for complications.
- A diagnosis of flu can usually be made based on the symptoms. Medical tests are not always needed, but they may be done to verify the diagnosis or check for complications.
- Treatment steps may include extra rest, drinking plenty of fluids, and using flu remedies and medications.
- To relieve nasal congestion, use salt-water drops (one-quarter teaspoon of salt in four ounces of water).
- To relieve a sore throat, gargle often with warm or cold double-strength tea or salt water.
- Use a cool-mist humidifier to increase air moisture. Clean humidifier daily.
- Avoid spreading germs. Use disposable tissues to cover your mouth & nose when you cough or sneeze. Wash hands often.
- Use a warm heating pad for aching muscles.
- Stay home until you have been free of fever for 24 hours, without the use of fever reducing medications.

## **MEDICATIONS**

- After discussing the risks and benefits with you, your physician may prescribe an influenza antiviral medication.
  - Anti-influenza medications are most effective if given within 48 hours of developing symptoms.
  - Anti-influenza medications may also be given to close family members of an influenza infected to help prevent the spread of the virus.
  - Antiviral medications for influenza are targeted at the influenza virus only and will not help treat or prevent illness caused by other viruses.

Your doctor also recommends the following over-the-counter medications. These medications may offer significant symptom relief:

- For fever or pain use acetaminophen or ibuprofen.  
(Acetaminophen and ibuprofen may also be alternated every 3 hours for persistent fever or pain.)
- Antihistamine
- Decongestant (Such as Phenylephrine or Pseudoephedrine)
- Mucolytic (Such as Guaifenesin)
- Cough Suppressant (Such as Dextromethorphan)
- Throat Lozenges
- Saline Nasal Spray or Drops
- Decongestant Nasal Spray (Limit use to 3 days)

## **SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IF YOU DEVELOP:**

- A higher fever or increased chills.
- Shortness of breath or chest pain with breathing.
- A cough that produces discolored mucus.
- Sinus pain, neck pain or stiffness.
- Vomiting.
- Rash.
- Confusion.
- Difficulty eating or drinking fluids.
- Worsening symptoms, particularly after a period of improvement.