

INFLUENZA in ADULTS

What is the flu?

The flu is an illness caused by a virus. There are three different flu viruses, types A, B, and C. Types A (the most common) and B (usually milder) cause the usual epidemics of the flu. Flu viruses usually strike between December and early April. Because each of the types of flu virus has different strains, every year the flu is slightly different. It can infect people several times during their lifetime. The flu can last a week or even longer.



Akos Santha, M.D.

The infected person usually will feel the worst during the first 2 or 3 days and may have any of the following symptoms:

- A sudden fever
- Chills and shakes with the fever
- Extreme tiredness
- Headache and body aches
- Dry, hacking cough
- Sore throat
- Vomiting and belly pain
- Stuffy, runny nose

There are usually no serious complications from the flu. However, sometimes an ear infection, a sinus infection, or pneumonia may develop. Talk to your doctor if your ear hurts, you feel congested in your face and head, your cough persists, or your fever lasts beyond 3 to 4 days.

How the flu is spread

The flu is spread from person to person in the following ways:

- Direct hand-to-hand contact
- Indirect contact (for example, if you touch an infected surface like a toy or a doorknob and then put your hand to your own eyes, nose, or mouth)
- Virus droplets being passed through the air from coughing or sneezing

The flu spreads very easily, especially in preschool and school-age children. Adults who spend time with children are exposed easily and can get the disease. The virus usually is transmitted just as symptoms begin or in the first several days of the illness.

Treatment

Antibiotics can be used to fight bacterial infections but have no effect on viruses, including the influenza viruses. Extra bed rest, extra fluids, and light, easy-to-digest meals can also help you feel better. If you are uncomfortable because of fever, taking acetaminophen will help you feel better. Over the counter fever reducers and pain killers may help alleviate your symptoms. But do not give aspirin to your child for the flu. An increased risk of developing Reye syndrome (an illness that can seriously affect the liver and the brain) is associated with aspirin use during bouts of the flu.

Prevention

Good hygiene is the best way to prevent the flu from spreading to other family members. If your child has the flu, the following will help prevent its spread.

- Teach your child to cover her mouth and nose with a tissue or her sleeve, but not with her hands, when coughing or sneezing. If your child is old enough, teach her how to blow her nose properly.
- Use facial tissues for runny noses and to catch sneezes. Throw them in the trash after each use.
- Avoid kissing your child and other potentially infected people on or around the mouth or face, though children will need plenty of hugs while they are sick.
- Make sure everyone washes her hands before and after coming in close contact with someone with the flu.
- Wash dishes and utensils in hot, soapy water or in the dishwasher.
- Do not let children share pacifiers, cups, utensils, washcloths, or towels.
- Disinfect. Viruses can live for more than 30 minutes on doorknobs, toilet handles, countertops, even on toys. Use a disinfectant or soap and hot water to keep these areas clean.
- Do not smoke. People exposed to tobacco smoke cough and wheeze more and have a harder time getting over the flu.

Influenza vaccine

For adults only one dose is needed. The best time to get the flu vaccine is in late October to early December before the flu season starts. Because the strains of flu are different every year, a new flu vaccine is developed each year as well. The vaccine is made from killed flu viruses and helps the immune system fight the flu. Most people are immune within 2 weeks of getting the vaccine. Side effects are almost always minor and include soreness at the site of the injection and a low-grade fever. The flu shot cannot cause influenza.

Important note: Even though there are few side effects to the vaccine, production of the vaccine involves the use of eggs. If you have had a serious allergic reaction to eggs or egg products, you should be skin tested before getting the vaccine. If skin testing confirms hypersensitivity, the vaccine usually should not be given.

Influenza or cold?

Both the flu and colds are caused by viruses and share many symptoms, but there are differences. A patient with a common cold usually has a lower fever, a runny nose, and only a small amount of coughing. Patients with the flu usually feel much sicker, achy, and miserable. Also, the flu tends to strike more quickly than a cold. Stomach upsets and vomiting are more common with the flu than with a cold. People who have colds usually have enough energy to keep up with their usual day-to-day routines. The flu, on the other hand, keeps lots patients in bed for several days.

When to call the doctor

- Difficulty breathing
- Blue lips or nails
- A cough that just will not go away (for more than 1 week)
- Pain in the ear
- Continued or new onset of fever after 3 to 4 days of illness
- If the patient seems extremely sick or his condition does not improve