

INFLUENZA

Influenza is a common, contagious respiratory infection caused by the Influenza virus. After exposure, it takes 24 to 48 hours to begin showing signs of the flu. There are three main types of the influenza virus: A, B, and C, but they frequently *mutate* (change) into different "strains". Different strains produce outbreaks almost every winter. Almost everyone is susceptible to the flu except infants. Complications are more serious in children and persons over 65 years of age. The virus is transmitted through close contact or indirect contact, such as shared drinks or touching something that the infected person has touched. Risk increases with stress, fatigue or exhaustion, poor nutrition, pregnancy, a recent or chronic illness (e.g., lung or heart disease), immune deficiency (from drugs or illness), and spending time in close quarters or crowded spaces (students, military, factory workers) during an epidemic.

Symptoms *may* include:

- Chills, fever; fatigue
- Aches including muscle ache, backache, and headache
- Cough, usually dry
- Sore throat; runny nose; and hoarseness

What your doctor can do:

- Diagnose influenza by asking about your symptoms, doing a physical exam, and ordering laboratory blood tests, sputum cultures, and X-rays of the chest.
- Recommend treatments primarily to control symptoms.
- Order antiviral drugs like *Amantadine*, *Tamiflu*, or *Relenza* to help shorten the course of the flu. These drugs do not "cure" the flu and are only effective if taken at the first sign of symptoms.

What you can do:

- Take antiviral medications until finished, regardless if you start to feel better.
- While you are ill, wash your hands frequently and cover the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing to avoid passing it on to others.
- Use saline drops to relieve nasal congestion. Insert two drops in each nostril as needed.
- Gargle with warm salt water or double-strength tea to help relieve a sore throat.
- Use a cool-mist humidifier to increase air moisture. This helps to thin lung secretions so they can be coughed up more easily. Clean the humidifier and change water daily.
- Apply warm, moist compress or a moist heating pad to aching muscles.
- Use non-prescription drugs like acetaminophen (Tylenol), cough syrups, nasal sprays or decongestants to help control symptoms. Avoid taking aspirin as some research shows a link between aspirin use (especially in children) during a viral illness and the development of Reye's syndrome (a severe illness of the central nervous system).
- Rest as much as possible to give the body a chance to fight off the virus.
- Increase fluid intake, including water, fruit juice, tea and non-carbonated drinks.

Prevention includes:

- Wash your hands frequently, especially after nose-blowing or before handling food.
- Get an influenza vaccine (flu shot) yearly and especially if you are over 65 years old or have chronic heart or lung disease.
- Avoiding contact with persons with upper respiratory infections (e.g., colds, sore throat, bronchitis).

What you can expect:

- Possible complications include bronchitis or pneumonia from a bacterial infection following the flu.
- Recovery is usually within 3-14 days if no complications occur.

Contact your doctor if you suffer high fevers; a persistent cough; thick nasal, sinus, or ear discharge; bloody or colored productive cough; sinus or ear pain; chest pain; neck pain or stiffness; or shortness of breath.