

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

INFLUENZA OR “THE FLU”

WHAT IS IT?

Influenza is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by influenza viruses. Commonly known as “the flu”, influenza is more serious than the common cold because of the risk of complications, which can be deadly. Influenza is not the same as the “stomach flu”, which causes vomiting and diarrhea.

Flu season in the United States runs through fall and winter, with peak times occurring anywhere from late November through March. This is because people spend more time in close contact with one another during the winter months.

HOW IS IT TRANSMITTED?

Influenza viruses live in the nose and throat. The respiratory secretions of infected individuals carry large amounts of the flu virus.

- Flu is primarily spread by tiny respiratory droplets made when someone with the flu sneezes, coughs, or talks. Droplets that land in the mouths/noses of people nearby can cause infection.
- Less often, infection occurs when someone touches an object (eg. door knobs, sink handles, cell phones) contaminated by respiratory secretions and then touches their nose, mouth, or eyes.

Therefore, in addition to avoiding close contact with those who are sick, it is important to:

- Wash your hands regularly. Handwashing is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of germs. Proper technique matters! Wet your hands, and lather with soap for 15-30 seconds (about the time it takes to sing “Happy Birthday to You” once or twice) before rinsing thoroughly. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer is an effective alternative if your hands are not visibly soiled.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth to decrease the risk of getting infected.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue (or your elbow if tissue is not available) to avoid getting others sick. Throw away dirty tissues immediately, and wash your hands after coughing or sneezing.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Flu symptoms are usually more severe than those of the common cold. The incubation period for the flu is 1-4 days. Symptoms typically start abruptly and improve over 2-5 days. Symptoms can include:

- Fever higher than 100°F, lasting 2-5 days (fevers from colds usually last 1-2 days)
- Headaches, muscle aches
- Cough (usually dry)
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Fatigue and weakness
- Nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea (atypical for adults but occurs in 10-20% of children)

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Influenza is usually diagnosed based on your symptoms and physical exam findings. Labs may include:

- Rapid flu tests with nasal swabs. These tests may be performed in certain cases. However, a negative rapid test does not necessarily rule out the flu.
- COVID-19 tests. Because COVID-19 and influenza share similar symptoms, testing is warranted in most cases to rule out COVID.
- Tests for other respiratory infections. Examples include strep or mono if clinical suspicion is high.

FOR HOW LONG IS THE FLU CONTAGIOUS?

People infected with influenza can be contagious beginning 1 day before and for about 5-7 days after symptoms begin. People are most contagious during the first 3-4 days of symptoms. Some people, especially children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems, may be contagious for longer.

IS THE FLU DANGEROUS?

Most people with the flu recover in 7-10 days without treatment (though it may take as long as 14 days in some cases). However, serious complications can occur in anyone. Examples include pneumonia, respiratory failure, and even death.

Certain high-risk groups are more likely to develop severe disease and complications. These groups include pregnant people, infants and children under age 5, adults age 65 and older, and people with chronic medical problems (eg. asthma, diabetes, heart disease, hepatitis, immune suppression, etc.).

DO MEDICATIONS HELP?

- ❖ **Antiviral medications** started within 2 days of symptom onset can lessen both the severity and duration of influenza by 1-2 days. They may also reduce the risk of complications, like pneumonia.
 - Tamiflu (oseltamivir) 75mg taken by mouth twice daily for 5 days is the most commonly prescribed antiviral treatment for the flu. It can cause mild side effects, such as nausea and vomiting.
 - Antiviral medications are recommended in mildly ill or low-risk patients if it has been 48 hours or less since symptoms began.
 - Prompt treatment with antiviral medications is recommended for patients with severe symptoms and for those at high-risk of developing complications.
- ❖ **Antibiotics** are not effective treatments for the flu and other viral infections.
 - However, antibiotics may be prescribed if influenza is complicated by a bacterial infection, such as pneumonia.
 - You may have a bacterial infection if your symptoms worsen after improving, or if your illness is severe or prolonged. In these cases, seek medical care as soon as possible.

SHOULD I STAY HOME?

YES!! Influenza is highly contagious. Students diagnosed with the flu should self-isolate until at least 24 hours after their fever is gone, without the use of a fever-reducing medication, like ibuprofen or acetaminophen. It is very important to avoid being around others while a fever is still present. This means you should not attend classes, work, and/or clinical rotations until you meet the criteria above.

SELF-CARE RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ **REST:** You do not have to stay in bed, but it's important to take it easy so that your body has the energy to fight off the virus. Avoid overexerting yourself physically and mentally.
- ❖ **DRINK FLUIDS:** Increase your fluid intake to prevent dehydration from fevers. You are drinking enough if you are urinating about every 3 hours.
 - Try Pedialyte, sports drinks, juices, non-caffeinated sodas, soups, and jello.
 - High-calorie fluids can replace solid foods for a few days if you do not feel like eating.
- ❖ **FEVER, BODY ACHES, & HEADACHES:**
 - Acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve) can be used to treat fever and pain. Take ibuprofen or naproxen with food to avoid an upset stomach.
 - Follow package instructions, and seek medical care if your fever is not improving with regular use of these medications.
 - Avoid using aspirin due to the risk of Reye syndrome, a serious condition affecting the brain & liver.
- ❖ **COUGH:**
 - Dextromethorphan cough suppressants (eg. Delsym, Robitussin DM, Triaminic DM) may be used to decrease bothersome symptoms. However, if you have a productive cough, it is better to avoid cough suppressants (except at bedtime if cough is affecting sleep).
 - Guaifenesin (eg. Mucinex or Robitussin) is an expectorant that can help thin the mucus from a productive cough. Hydrating well can also thin out secretions.
 - If your cough is coming from postnasal drip (rather than your lower airways), the treatments for congestion listed below can be effective.
 - Cough drops and non-caffeinated fluids can decrease symptoms and soothe an irritated throat.
 - Avoid tobacco, marijuana, and vaping.
- ❖ **SORE THROAT:**
 - Pain medications (such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen) and sore throat lozenges or sprays can be helpful.
 - Gargling with a salt-water solution (1/4 tsp of salt per ½ cup of warm water) or drinking warm water mixed with honey and lemon may also decrease symptoms.
 - Stick to soft foods, and stay hydrated. Avoid tobacco, marijuana, and vaping.
 - If your sore throat is due to mouth-breathing from a stuffy nose, consider the treatments for congestion below.
- ❖ **CONGESTION:**
 - A runny or stuffy nose can be relieved by increasing fluid intake and “steaming” in the shower or with a humidifier.
 - Oral decongestants (eg. phenylephrine or Sudafed PE) and nasal decongestants (Afrin) can help shrink swollen nasal passages. Avoid decongestants if you have high blood pressure. Do not use Afrin for more than 3 days in a row as this can lead to worsening congestion after stopping Afrin.
 - Antihistamines (eg. Zyrtec, Claritin, Allegra, Benadryl) may help a runny nose.
 - Steroid nasal sprays (eg. Flonase, Nasacort) can decrease congestion, mucus production, postnasal drip, as well as cough due to postnasal drip.
 - Saline nasal sprays used several times a day can thin out secretions and improve drainage.

CONSULT YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU:

- Are not improving after 5 days or have worsening symptoms.
- Have difficulty breathing or chest pain.
- Are coughing up bloody sputum.
- Are vomiting and unable to keep liquids down.
- Have signs of dehydration, such as dizziness when standing or absence of urination.
- Have severe or persistent headaches, especially if they are associated with a fever of 101°F or higher, neck pain, rash, nausea, or visual changes.
- Have seizures or uncontrolled convulsions.
- Become confused or less responsive than normal.

HOW DO I PREVENT THE FLU?

The best way to protect yourself is to get an annual **influenza vaccine**, which can reduce your chance of infection by 40-60%. Contrary to popular belief, you cannot get the flu from the flu shot because it contains killed viruses.

- The best time to get the flu vaccine is in mid-October or early November, before the flu season starts but not so early that the vaccine wears off before the end of the season. However, the flu vaccine can be given anytime during the flu season.
- After vaccination, it takes about 2 weeks for your body to develop enough antibodies to protect against the flu.
- Student Health offers free flu vaccine to all enrolled students. Those at high risk of developing complications from influenza are strongly advised to get the vaccine. Consult your healthcare provider for more information.

HOW DO I PREVENT THE SPREAD OF FLU AT HOME?

❖ **If you are the sick person:**

- Avoid being around other household members, especially those at high risk for flu complications.
- Stay in a room separate from the common areas of the house (eg. a spare bedroom with its own bathroom is ideal). Keep the sickroom door closed.
- Use a separate bathroom if possible. If you are sharing a bathroom, clean it regularly with a household disinfectant.
- Wear a face mask if you must be in the same room as other household members or if you are out in public.
- Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, and remember to wash your hands well afterwards.

❖ **If you are a household member:**

- Avoid being around the sick person. Especially avoid face-to-face contact.
- Wear a face mask if you are in the same room as the sick person.
- If you are a household member at high risk for flu complications, avoid being within 6 feet of the sick person.
- Avoid using the sick person's bathroom. If a shared bathroom cannot be avoided, clean bathroom surfaces frequently with a household disinfectant and do not share towels.
- Choose one adult in the home to take care of the sick person. This person should not be someone at high risk for flu complications.
- Wash your hands regularly, especially after contact with the sick person or the sick person's room, bathroom, and/or belongings. If soap and water is not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- If you are at high risk for flu complications or are a healthcare worker, contact Student Health (804-828-8828 for the Monroe Park clinic or 804-828-9220 for the MCV clinic) or your medical provider to see if you should be prescribed antiviral medications to prevent the flu.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES: www.cdc.gov, goaskalice.columbia.edu