

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?

The influenza virus lives in the nose and throat. The respiratory secretions of infected individuals carry large amounts of flu virus, which is easily spread through the air by sneezing and coughing. Less often, infected respiratory droplets can also be transmitted to objects (like door knobs, sink handles, and cell phones). 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”) before rinsing thoroughly. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer is an effective alternative as long as you do not have visibly soiled hands.
- **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. Don’t forget to wash your hands well after coughing or sneezing.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Flu symptoms are usually more severe than those of the common cold. The incubation period for influenza 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 caused by 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. Rapid lab testing with nasal swabs may be performed in certain cases. However, a negative rapid test does not necessarily rule out the flu.

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).

- Certain high-risk groups may be more likely to develop severe disease and complications, such as pneumonia, respiratory failure, and even death.
- **High-risk groups** include pregnant women, infants and children under age 5, elderly persons, and persons 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. These medicines also make you less contagious to others. Tamiflu (oseltamivir) 75mg taken twice daily for 5 days is the most commonly prescribed antiviral treatment for the flu. It can cause mild side effects, including nausea and vomiting.

- Prompt treatment with antiviral medications is recommended for patients with severe symptoms and for those at high-risk of developing complications.
- Antiviral medications are recommended in mildly ill or low-risk patients if it has been 48 hours or less since symptoms began.

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 stay home 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 no class, work, clinical rotations, hanging out with roommates, etc.

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:** Fever and pain can be treated with acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve). Avoid using aspirin due to the risk of Reye's syndrome. Take ibuprofen or naproxen with food to avoid an upset stomach. Follow package instructions, and seek medical if your fever is not improving with regular use of these medications.
- **COUGH:** Dextromethorphan cough suppressants (eg. Delsym, Robitussin DM, Triaminic DM) may be used to decrease 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. Cough drops and increasing 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. Treat your stuffy nose if it is causing you to mouth-breathe.
- **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 decongestant use 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. Antihistamines (eg. Zyrtec, Claritin, Allegra, Benadryl) may help a runny nose. Steroid nasal sprays (eg. Flonase, Nasacort) can decrease congestion, mucus production, and postnasal drip. Saline nasal sprays 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%.

- The best time to get the flu vaccine is in mid-October or early November, before the flu season starts. 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.
- Contrary to popular belief, you cannot get the flu from the flu shot because it contains killed viruses.

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 facemask 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 facemask 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, contact Student Health (828-8828 for the Monroe Park clinic or 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, www.goaskalice.columbia.edu