

What is influenza (the flu)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by an influenza virus. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Most healthy people recover from the flu without complications. However, older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions are at higher risk for serious complications from the flu.

What are the symptoms?

The flu usually starts suddenly and may include: fever (usually high), shaking chills, body aches and muscle pain, dry cough, headache, tiredness (can be extreme), sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and loss of appetite.

How is the flu different from a common cold?

The flu and the common cold are caused by different viruses. Their symptoms are similar and it may be difficult to determine which virus a person has. In general, flu symptoms are more intense. A person with a cold is less likely to have a fever and more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose and a hacking cough.

What are the risks of having the flu?

The flu may cause other health problems such as bacterial pneumonia or dehydration. It may also make chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes worse.

How is the flu spread?

The flu virus is spread through coughing and sneezing. It is possible to give someone else the flu before you know you are sick as well as when you are sick.

How can you reduce your chances of getting the flu?

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue away.
- Cough or sneeze into your bended elbow.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- Stay away from people who are sick as much as you can. If you get the flu, stay home from work or school.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs often are spread this way.
- Get a flu shot.

How is the flu treated?

If you get the flu, try to get plenty of rest, drink a lot of liquids and avoid using alcohol and tobacco. You may take over-the-counter medications to relieve the symptoms of the flu. Never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms, particularly fever. Aspirin use may increase the risk of Reyes Syndrome. Your health care provider may prescribe anti-viral medications if your visit is within the first 48 hours after experiencing your first symptoms.

People at high risk for complications from the flu should consult their health-care provider if they develop flu-like symptoms. Those at high risk include people 65 years or older, people with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women and young children.