FACT SHEET: INFLUENZA (FLU)

May 2025

WHAT IS INFLUENZA?

Influenza is a contagious viral infection of the lungs and airways (nose and throat) that is also known as “the flu”. Flu viruses can be detected year-round in the United States, but they are most common during the fall and winter.

WHO CAN GET INFLUENZA?

Anyone can get Influenza. However, people 65 years of age and older, children 5 years and younger, pregnant women, and people with certain chronic health conditions are at a greater risk of serious complications resulting in hospitalization or death.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF INFLUENZA?

People who have the flu often feel some or all of the following symptoms: fever or feeling feverish, chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, and tiredness. Some people, particularly children, may also have vomiting and diarrhea. Symptoms may be mild to severe and may even result in death.

HOW DOES INFLUENZA SPREAD?

The flu virus mainly spreads when an infected person talks, coughs, or sneezes, and droplets are breathed in by people nearby. It also spreads by touching your eyes, mouth, or nose after touching surfaces or objects contaminated with the flu virus.

HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

Symptoms generally come on suddenly, usually ranging between 1-4 days from infection (on average 2 days).

IS A PERSON WITH INFLUENZA CONTAGIOUS?

Yes. A person infected with the flu may be able to infect others from a day before getting sick to about 5-7 days after getting sick.

HOW IS INFLUENZA TREATED?

While the flu vaccine is the first and most important step in preventing flu, once infected, Influenza antiviral drugs are a treatment option. They work best when started as early as 1-2 days after symptoms begin. They can lessen the severity and duration of illness by 1-2 days and can help prevent flu complications like pneumonia. Antiviral drugs, however, are not a substitute for vaccination.

SHOULD A PERSON WITH INFLUENZA BE EXCLUDED FROM WORK OR SCHOOL?

Yes, the person can infect others up to 5–7 days after becoming sick, and one day before symptoms develop. You can resume normal activity 24 hours after your fever is gone and you're not taking fever-reducing medication.

CAN INFLUENZA BE PREVENTED?

Yes, receiving the flu vaccine, can help prevent the flu or lessen the severity of symptoms. Routine annual flu vaccination is recommended for all persons aged ≥6 months who do not have contraindications. Flu vaccines protect against the four influenza viruses that will be the most common during the upcoming flu season. Vaccinations are particularly important for people who are more vulnerable to serious illness (e.g., Pregnant women, children<5, people>65 and people with certain chronic health conditions). It is best to get vaccinated early in the fall soon after the vaccine becomes available (ideally by October). It takes about 2 weeks after vaccination for the body to become protected against the flu virus. The protection provided by the vaccine is expected to last for one influenza season. Some other recommendations to decrease the spread of flu:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as toys, doorknobs, tables, and counters.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about influenza and other related health topics can be found cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5865.

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