



**CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
DIVISION OF DISEASE CONTROL**

Influenza (Flu)

What is influenza?

Influenza (also known as the flu) is a contagious disease that is caused by the influenza virus. It attacks the respiratory tract in humans (nose, throat, lungs) and usually comes on suddenly. In the United States, the peak of flu season can occur anywhere from late December through March.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Symptoms of flu include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Children can have additional gastro-intestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults. Although the term "stomach flu" is sometimes used to describe vomiting, nausea, or diarrhea, these illnesses are caused by other viruses, bacteria, or possibly parasites, and are rarely related to influenza.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about one to four days, with an average of about two days.

Who gets influenza?

Each flu season is unique, but it is estimated that approximately 10% to 20% of U.S. residents get the flu, and an average of 114,000 persons are hospitalized for flu-related complications. About 36,000 Americans die on average per year from the complications of flu; the majority of deaths occur in people over 65 years of age.

How is influenza spread?

The flu usually spreads from person to person when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks and the virus is sent into the air. Unlike many other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, the flu causes severe illness and life-threatening complications in many people.

When and for how long is a person able to spread influenza?

The period when an infected person is contagious depends on the age of the person. Adults may be contagious from one day prior to becoming sick and for three to seven days after they first develop symptoms. Some children may be contagious for longer than a week.

What are the complications associated with influenza?

Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections as complications from the flu. Those aged 65 years and older and persons of any age with chronic medical conditions are at highest risk for serious complications of flu.

What can be done to prevent the spread of influenza?

By far, the single best way to prevent the flu is for individuals, especially persons at high risk for serious complications from the flu, to get a flu shot each fall.

What are some of the myths about flu?

Myth #1: *Influenza is merely a nuisance.*

Wrong. Influenza is a major cause of illness and death in the United States and leads to an average of about 36,000 deaths and 114,000 hospitalizations per year.

Myth #2: *Flu shots cause the flu.*

Wrong. The licensed injectable flu vaccine used in the United States, which is made from inactivated or killed flu viruses, cannot cause the flu and does not cause flu illness.

Myth #3: *Flu vaccine doesn't work.*

Not exactly. When the viruses in the vaccine and circulating viruses are similar, the flu shot is very effective. There are several reasons why people think influenza vaccine doesn't work. People who have gotten a flu vaccination may then get sick from a different virus that causes respiratory illness but is mistaken for flu; the flu shot only prevents illness caused by the influenza virus. In addition, protection from the vaccine is not 100%. Studies of healthy young adults have shown flu vaccine to be 70% to 90% effective in preventing the flu. In the elderly and those with certain long-term medical conditions, the flu shot is often less effective in preventing illness. However, in the elderly, flu vaccine is very effective in reducing hospitalizations and death from flu-related causes.

Myth #4: *There is no need to get a flu vaccine every year.*

Wrong. The flu viruses are constantly changing. Generally, new influenza virus strains circulate every flu season, so the vaccine is changed each year.