

ABOUT INFLUENZA (FLU)

Influenza is a viral infection that is characterized by fever, cough, headache and body aches, with inflammation of the respiratory tract. Influenza usually occurs as an epidemic during the winter. The epidemic often occurs in two waves, the first among school students and their families, the second among shut-ins and nursing home patients. The flu is a respiratory infection. Though many people call a stomach or intestinal infection "flu", real influenza does not usually cause nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.

Among healthy children and adults, the flu is more of an annoyance than a threat. However, among the elderly, the bedridden, those with heart or lung conditions, women in the third trimester of pregnancy and infants, the flu can be deadly. Persons in these groups should receive a vaccination every year. The flu vaccine provides immunity from specific strains of the influenza virus. Each year, the vaccine manufacturers follow the spread of the disease and produce vaccine to match the specific strains that are causing infection. The vaccine provides immunity in about two weeks. The immunity persists for up to one year. However, since each year may see the development of different strains of flu, everyone in the target groups should be vaccinated each year near the start of the flu season.

Flu symptoms generally develop in about 48 hours after infection, with fever persisting for two to three days, though sometimes as long as five days. Other symptoms may last for two to three weeks. The treatment for flu is focused on relieving the symptoms. Rest in bed while the fever persists, and avoid exertion for a day or two after the fever subsides. Steam inhalation and nasal decongestants may relieve some of the respiratory symptoms. Aspirin or acetaminophen may help relieve fever, but avoid giving aspirin to children because of the risk of Reye's syndrome. See your doctor immediately if you are in a high-risk group, since there are other medications available.

Influenza rarely requires hospital treatment, except among high risk patients. However, if fever persists for more than five days, or signs of pneumonia develop, see your doctor immediately. If there are signs of cyanosis (blue color of the skin), blood in the sputum, or a change in level of consciousness, summon an ambulance immediately.