

Influenza (“The Flu”)

Fact Sheet

What is influenza?

Influenza (the flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. There are two main types or strains of influenza virus, types A and B. Influenza A and B viruses are responsible for seasonal flu epidemics each year. Over the course of a flu season, different types (A & B) and subtypes of influenza A viruses can circulate and cause illness.

Seasonal influenza refers to the flu viruses that circulate during the winter months each year, and from which vaccines are chosen to protect people.

How is influenza spread?

The main way that influenza viruses are spread is person to person by "droplet spread." This happens when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled through the air and deposited on the mouth, nose or eyes of people nearby. Influenza viruses may also be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on an object and then touches their mouth, nose or eyes before washing their hands.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

The flu usually comes on suddenly and may include these symptoms:

- Fever (usually high; $\geq 101^{\circ}\text{F}$)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Muscle aches/body aches
- Weakness
- Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can occur, but are more common in children than adults.

Influenza causes mild to severe illness, and can be fatal.

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

Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Children and immune-compromised people may pass the virus for longer than 7 days. That means that a

person may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before they feel ill, as well as during their illness. Some people can be infected with flu virus but have no symptoms. During this time, they can still spread influenza to others, if they sneeze or cough.

Does infection with influenza make a person immune to other strains of influenza?

In general, a person infected with a particular strain of influenza virus will have some immunity to closely related viruses – this immunity may persist for one or more years. The degree of protection depends on the health of the person involved. Young and healthy people with normal immune systems will likely have good immunity against the same or closely related viruses from one year to the next. However, people with weakened immune systems are less likely to have immunity that carries over in other years.

It's important to remember that influenza viruses are constantly changing, so immunity against one strain is less effective against new strains as influenza viruses evolve over time.

What are the complications associated with influenza?

Complications of flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, and diabetes.

Are there vaccines for influenza?

Yes. The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each year. Within two weeks of vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection.

Who should get vaccinated for influenza?

Everyone, every year. It is recommended that all people 6 months of age or older get a flu vaccine.

It is especially important for the following people to get an annual flu vaccine because they are at

high risk of serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for high risk persons:

- Children younger than 5, and especially children younger than age 2
- Pregnant women
- Adults 65 years of age and older
- People of any age with chronic medical conditions
- People who live in long-term care facilities
- People who are more than 100 lbs. overweight
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:
 - Healthcare workers
 - Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
 - Caregivers and household contacts of children less than 6 months of age, as these children are too young to be vaccinated

During flu seasons when vaccine supplies are limited or delayed, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) makes recommendations regarding priority for vaccination, based on this risk status.

What can be done to prevent the spread of influenza?

- **Get vaccinated every year!** This is the single best way to prevent seasonal flu.
- **Avoid close contact with people who are sick.**
- **Stay home when you are sick.** If possible, stay home from work and school when you are sick. Also, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick. Postpone errands until you are well.
- **Cover your mouth and nose.** Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Wash your hands after disposing of used tissues. If you don't have a

tissue, sneeze or cough into your sleeve, not your hands.

- **Clean your hands.** Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. When soap and water are not available, alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers may be used.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.** Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.
- **Practice other good health habits.** Get enough sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food.

How long do I keep my child home from school or child care?

Your child should stay home from school or child care for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone - without the use of fever-reducing medications. A fever is defined as an oral temperature of 100° F or higher.

For more information about influenza, please contact your health care provider or Clark County Public Health at (360) 397-8182.

<http://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/diseases/index.html>



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