

THE FLU AND HOW TO AVOID IT

Influenza, also known as the flu, is a respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus. It is different from the common cold because its symptoms come on suddenly and are more severe.

Symptoms of flu include fever, chills, headache, tiredness, dry cough, runny nose, sore throat, congestion, and body aches. Children may have an upset stomach, vomiting, or diarrhea.

The symptoms of flu appear one to three days after exposure to the flu virus, and the illness may last for one to two weeks. Flu occurs most commonly from November through April.

Most people who get the flu get better within one to two weeks. They may have a cough and tire easily for a while longer. But flu can cause serious problems, called complications. For older adults, babies, and people with certain chronic illnesses, the flu and its complications can be life-threatening. That's why it's important to try to avoid getting the flu.

YOU CAN AVOID FLU

Influenza vaccination is the best method for preventing the flu and its complications. Whether you decide to get the vaccine or not, there are many things you can do to avoid the flu. First, it helps to know how the flu spreads in households or through the community.

Flu spreads from person to person. You can get the flu if someone with the illness coughs or sneezes near you. The flu virus travels in droplets from the infected person's nose or mouth through the air and enters the body through your nose or mouth.

You can also get the flu simply by touching an object like a telephone or doorknob that someone with the flu has already touched. The flu virus passes from that object to your hand and then to your nose or mouth. There are many ways to prevent flu and colds.

These include:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too. Droplets containing the flu virus travel in the air only 3 feet when a person sneezes, so keeping your distance from someone who is sick is a good way to avoid the flu.
- Avoid crowds. You are at greatest risk of getting infected in places where there are a lot of people.
- Stay home when you are sick. This will help prevent others from catching your illness.
- Cover your mouth and nose. Use a tissue when coughing or sneezing, or sneeze or cough into your sleeve.
- Clean your hands. Help protect yourself from germs.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Eat, sleep, and exercise. Your body has defenses to guard you from getting sick. These defenses are called the immune system. For your immune system to work well, it's important to eat right, get enough sleep, and be active each day.

CLEAN YOUR HANDS

Clean your hands often to help protect yourself from the flu virus.

- Use a waterless cleansing gel (hand sanitizer) when you can't use soap and water. Keep a small bottle in your glove compartment, purse, or pocket.
- Using soap and water, rub both sides of your hands vigorously. Remember to clean between your fingers. Count out at least 15 seconds while rubbing your hands before rinsing. (Sing the Happy Birthday song in your head to measure the time. Check yourself one time to be sure you are not singing too fast.) In a public restroom, turn off the faucet with a paper towel, not with your clean hands. If possible, avoid touching the handle of the towel dispenser. Pat your hands dry or use the air blower in the restroom.

TREATING THE FLU

How to treat the flu

- Rest.
- Drink plenty of liquids.
- Avoid using alcohol and tobacco.
- Take medication to relieve the symptoms of flu (but never give aspirin to children or to teenagers who have flu-like symptoms).

ANTIBIOTICS WON'T HELP

Antibiotics cannot prevent flu. Antibiotics won't help with the usual case of flu. Antibiotics work only on infections caused by bacteria. Flu is caused by a virus. Don't ask your doctor for antibiotics to prevent or treat the flu. These medicines will not help. In some cases, your doctors may choose to use certain anti-viral drugs to prevent or treat the flu.

Sometimes the flu develops into another form of illness. In these cases, antibiotics may be helpful. Your doctor will explain this to you and will prescribe antibiotics only if required.

Medicine for prevention and treatment

It's important to remember that most healthy people recover from the flu without complications. Medicines called anti-viral can be prescribed to help prevent or treat flu. If taken within two days of getting sick, these drugs can reduce the flu symptoms by at least a day. They also can make you less contagious to others. Your doctor will consider a number of things before making a treatment decision, such as your risk for complications from flu. If you have questions

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, please ask your doctor or nurse.