

## *Influenza*

### WHAT IS INFLUENZA?

Influenza, or “the flu” is a contagious respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus.

### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF THE FLU?

The symptoms of the flu are somewhat similar to any upper respiratory illness, like the common cold, with some exceptions. First the flu generally comes on abruptly rather than gradually; second it is usually accompanied by a much higher fever and body aches. Again, the flu is similar to a cold (headache, tiredness, cough, sore throat, runny nose) but generally much worse.



### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO KEEP FROM GETTING THE FLU?

First, get an influenza vaccination. There are two types of influenza vaccinations, both of which are about 80% effective in preventing the flu.

1. The “flu shot” – This uses inactivated flu virus and can be given to almost all people except children younger than six (6) months old, persons allergic to eggs or thimerosal, persons with a history of Guillian-Barre Syndrome, and persons with a fever at the time. You cannot get the flu from the shot, but you may experience some side effects such as arm soreness, redness or swelling; allergic reactions, fever, fatigue, and body aches are much less common.

2. Nasal spray – The nasal spray (Flu Mist) is a live attenuated (weakened) virus. It can only be used by healthy individuals between the ages of 5 and 49. Healthcare workers need to be cautious about using the nasal spray because there is a theoretical risk that the live attenuated virus could be transmitted to immunocompromised persons. There is a large list of others who should not use the nasal spray, so check with your doctor.



Second, since the virus is spread by microscopic droplets from an infected person's respiratory system (e.g. sneezing, coughing, and then contaminating common surfaces) it is prudent to stay out of crowds and away from anyone who may be infected. Also,

1. Wash your hands frequently or use an alcohol-based gel.
2. Don't touch your eyes, nose, or mouth; this is commonly where the virus enters the body.
3. Wash any shared surfaces (phones, keyboards) frequently as the virus can live on some surfaces for hours.
4. Stay healthy by eating well, exercising and keeping your immune system in tiptop shape.

### **WHO IS AT HIGHEST RISK OF SEVERE INFLUENZA AND DEFINITELY SHOULD BE VACCINATED?**

Since influenza causes about 36,000 deaths in the United States every year and about 200,000 people are hospitalized with the flu, there are certain high-risk groups of people that should be vaccinated:

1. All children age six (6) months to five (5) years (this is a change from previous)
2. All adults over 50 years old
3. Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
4. Anyone with a chronic medical condition (ask your doctor for the list)
5. Pregnant women
6. All healthcare personnel
7. Persons who live with or care for persons above who are at high risk.

## SHOULD I SEE THE DOCTOR IF I THINK I HAVE THE FLU?

Most healthy adults can stay at home, drink lots of fluids, rest and recover within seven to ten days. Common antibiotics do not work against the flu because it is caused by a virus. However, there are some specific medications that the doctor can prescribe for you that may be effective in shortening the period of time you are ill; there are specific tests available to the doctor to diagnose the flu and the medication must be started within the first two or three days of the symptoms, so if you believe you have “the flu”, see your doctor early on.

## SUMMARY

Prevention is available; cure is not. Get your shot!

Sources of  
Information:

CDC  
Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices  
Web MD  
FDA