

Influenza Virus (the flu)



Influenza, also known as the flu, is a contagious disease caused by an influenza virus. It attacks the respiratory tract in humans (nose, throat, and lungs).

The Florida Department of Health (DOH) encourages the public to call their physicians or their local county health department to find out if flu vaccination is available—especially those who are at high risk for complications. Individuals considered high risk include healthy children aged 6 to 23 months, adults aged 65 and older, women who will be pregnant during the flu season and individuals with chronic health conditions such as heart or lung disease, asthma, diabetes or cancer. Health care providers are strongly encouraged to immunize the most vulnerable people first. Those at risk of transmitting flu to high-risk people, including household contacts and health care workers, should also be vaccinated if a sufficient supply is available.

Symptoms

Influenza usually comes on suddenly and may include these symptoms:

- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness (can be extreme)
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Nasal congestion
- Body aches

“Flu Season”

In the United States, the flu season can typically range from November through March and even longer. Nationally, more than 36,000 people die from flu complications each year and thousands more are hospitalized. It can affect people of all ages. Many people who suffer from the flu will experience the typical mild to moderate symptoms and recover without incident.

What types of complications can occur with the flu?

Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure or asthma. 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.

How does the flu spread?

The flu is spread, or transmitted, when a person who has the flu coughs, sneezes, or speaks and sends flu virus into the air, and other people inhale the virus. The virus enters the nose, throat, or lungs of a person and begins to multiply, causing symptoms of influenza. Influenza may also be spread when a person touches a surface that has flu viruses on it—a door handle, for instance—and then touches his or her nose or mouth.

How do people know if they have the flu?

It is very difficult to distinguish the flu from other viral or bacterial causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. A test can confirm that an illness is influenza if the patient is tested within the first two to three days after symptoms begin. In addition, a doctor’s examination may be needed to determine whether a person has another infection that is a complication of influenza.

How soon can a person get sick if exposed to the flu?

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.

How long is a person with flu virus contagious?

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.

Frequently Asked Questions about Influenza

Q. What is Influenza?

A. Influenza commonly called the “flu,” is an infection of the respiratory tract caused by the influenza virus. Compared with most other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, influenza infection often causes a more severe illness.

Q. What are the symptoms of the flu?

A. Influenza is typically characterized by headache, fever, a severe cough, sore throat, muscle aches, runny or stuffy nose, and often, extreme fatigue.

Q. How does the flu spread?

A. The flu is spread by coughing and sneezing. It usually spreads from person to person, though occasionally a person may become infected by touching something with virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

Q. How can the flu be prevented?

A. For healthy persons, simple steps can be taken to protect against flu. Frequently washing hands and avoiding touching the nose, eyes, and mouth will help avoid transmitting or getting the flu or other respiratory infections, like a cold. It is a good idea to stay home when you are sick and keep sick children home. Avoid close contact with anyone who is ill, and avoid crowds and areas where people congregate and are likely to be sneezing and coughing.

Q. Who should get a flu shot?

A. All infants ages 6-23 months should be vaccinated, as well as children ages 2-18 years who take chronic aspirin. All elderly persons ages 65 and older, healthcare workers and residents of nursing homes should also get a flu shot.

Q. Should anyone NOT get a flu shot?

A. Healthy persons ages 2-64 do not need a flu shot. Also, people with a fever should not get their flu shot until symptoms lessen.

Q. Are there other ways to get vaccinated besides a shot?

A. Yes, in fact, there is a new option called the “flu mist,” a nasal flu vaccine available for high risk persons ages 5 to 49.

Q. Are there side effects to the flu vaccination?

A. The viruses in the flu shot are killed (inactivated), so you cannot get the flu from a flu shot. However, some minor side effects could occur such as soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot was given, fever (low grade), and body aches.

Q. When should I get my flu shot?

A. Flu activity in the United States generally peaks between late December and early March. Health experts suggest receiving the vaccination by early December as it takes up to two weeks before the vaccination becomes preventative in an individual's system.

Q. Are any of the flu shots being given now from the Chiron Company that has been banned?

A. No, all available flu vaccines are from the Adventis Company, and are safe.

Other than the vaccine, are there additional precautionary ways to avoid getting the flu? **Yes.**

- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Do not share eating utensils, drinking glasses, towels, or other personal items.
- Stay home when you are sick and keep sick children home.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, if possible.
- Avoid crowds and areas where people congregate and are likely to be sneezing and coughing.
- Cover your nose or mouth with a tissue when sneezing or coughing.



For more information visit www.cdc.gov or www.myflorida.com or contact your local county health department.