

Patient Information:

The Flu: Questions and Answers

- Symptoms
- Prevention
- Diagnosis
- Treatment

What is the flu?

Influenza, "the flu" is a contagious respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus. Virus types include A (including novel A H1N1), B, and C. Types A and B normally cause seasonal outbreaks almost every year typically beginning in November and ending in April. Novel A H1N1 (previously known as "swine flu") in humans causes similar symptoms to the seasonal flu but may also include diarrhea and vomiting. Type C causes a mild respiratory illness and is not believed to cause epidemics.

What are the symptoms?

Flu symptoms start 1-4 days after exposure. Symptoms usually start suddenly with high fever (>100 degrees), muscle aches, headache, dry cough, runny/stuffy nose, sore throat, and weakness. Many people are so ill that they cannot get out of bed for 1-3 days. Fever can last for 5 days, and the cough and fatigue often persist for 2-3 weeks. Flu symptoms are much more severe than a cold. Most people remember when they have had the flu because of the severity of the symptoms.

Lack of appetite is another symptom; however nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea are uncommon in adults with the flu. (The term "stomach flu" is often used inaccurately; that term refers to gastrointestinal viruses, not influenza.) The very young, the very old, and those with chronic medical conditions, such as asthma, diabetes and heart problems, are at the greatest risk for serious complications.

New (CDC) guidance indicates that people with influenza-like illness (ILI) should stay home for at least 24 hours after their fever is gone (without the use of fever-reducing medicine). A fever is defined as having a temperature of 100° Fahrenheit or 37.8° Celsius or greater. This new (08/05/09 CDC update) recommendation applies to camps, schools, businesses, mass gatherings, and other community settings where the majority of people are not at increased risk for influenza complications. CDC recommends this exclusion period regardless of whether or not antiviral medications are used.

How is flu spread?

The influenza virus is very contagious and is spread by respiratory droplets containing the virus from sneezing, coughing and hand contact. Most healthy people can spread

the flu 1 day before getting symptoms and up to 5 days after being ill.

How can I prevent getting the flu?

- ♦ **Getting an annual flu vaccine is usually helpful.** It takes 2 weeks after the vaccination ("the flu shot") to develop immunity. Clinics are held on the Virginia Tech campus usually in late October and again in December. Also local pharmacies will advertise when they offer it. The vaccine is offered at Schiffert Health Center ONLY for those with certain chronic medical conditions because of limited supplies. Contact the Allergy/Immunization Clinic at SHC, 231-7621, for more information. (Students have to provide written documentation from their medical provider at home or a SHC practitioner to qualify to receive it here at the health service.)
- ♦ **Frequent hand washing and use of hand sanitizers help prevent getting the flu.** Wash hands with soap and water, rubbing for 20 seconds, dry and use the towel to turn off faucet and open door. Carry an alcohol-based hand sanitizer such as Purell® and use it often.
- ♦ **Getting enough sleep and avoiding alcohol are also major factors.** Refrain from being in crowds or in situations where you have close contact with people.
- ♦ **Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.** Use a tissue to cover nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing; discard tissue and wash hands. Discard soiled tissues frequently. Empty your trash, wipe down your personal space (desk, phone, remote, key board, mouse, bathroom sink, door knobs and light switch plates) with Lysol® or Clorox® Wipes during your illness and for 5-7 days after; your roommate and friends will appreciate this!

These simple recommendations (listed above) make a major impact on not getting the flu.

How is flu diagnosed?

The flu is usually diagnosed by the sudden onset and type of symptoms you have. Although other infections can cause similar symptoms, the majority of the time if you have sudden onset of fever, body aches, headache, and dry cough during flu season, you have the flu.

The flu swab is a nasal swab offered at SHC that can help in the diagnosis, but it is not necessary in every case.

The Flu:

Questions and Answers

There is a cost and it is done by rotating the swab way up in your nose. The test should be done within the first 4 days of illness. The test is not 100% accurate. False negatives can occur: you can still have the flu and have a negative flu swab test. Your provider will decide if this test might be helpful.

How is the flu treated?

Antibiotics have no effect on the flu. Rest is important—your immune system requires more rest to kill this aggressive virus. Drinking fluids is important to prevent dehydration—you lose more water with the high fevers and frequent coughing.

The following are over-the-counter suggestions for symptoms:

1. Fever, sore throat, headache, and/or body aches:
 - ♦ Alternate ibuprofen with acetaminophen every 4 hours (Take 3 of the 200mg ibuprofen; then in 4 hours, take 2 of the 500mg acetaminophen; 4 hours later, repeat the ibuprofen and so on.) For the first few days of the flu, you will not be able to get your temperature down to normal; but at least reducing the fever down to 100 will make you feel better than having it stay at 103. You may have no appetite, but take these meds at least with a piece of toast or crackers so you don't take them on an empty stomach.
2. Nasal congestion and runny nose:
 - ♦ Oral meds: Sudafed (pseudoephedrine) 30 mg: 1-2 tablets every 4-6 hours; it can keep you awake if you take it after 6 pm. Mucinex[®]: 1 tablet every 12 hours.
 - ♦ Generic nasal saline spray can be used frequently and for long-periods of time. Use in the morning with a hot shower is outstanding at clearing the sinuses.
 - ♦ Topical decongestant sprays, such as Afrin[®], Mucinex[®] or Nostrilla[®] as directed, every 12 hours for NO MORE than 4 days to avoid rebound congestion. Don't use these products at the same time as Sudafed[®] (pseudoephedrine) or "D" version of allergy medications.
 - ♦ Medicinal balms, such Vicks Vapor Rub[®] or Metholatum[®] balm, dabbed beneath the nose.
3. Sore throat:
 - ♦ Cepacol[®] Maximum Strength Lozenges tend to be the most potent with benzocaine (less like candy.) Throat sprays like Chloraseptic[®] can provide temporary relief.
4. Cough:
 - ♦ Vicks Vapor Rub[®] or Metholatum[®] rubbed on the neck and chest for chest congestion. As bizarre as it sounds, application of these balms on the bottom of the feet suppresses cough through processes better understood by reflexologists. Wear socks over the balms on the feet.

- ♦ Use a warm air humidifier. Place it on a night stand by the bedside. In the water add 1 tablespoon of over-the-counter Vicks VaporSteam[®] for each quart of water in the tank. Keep running at bedside during sleep periods. Clean your machine every 4 days!
 - ♦ Delsym[®] cough syrup, as directed, last 12 hours.
 - ♦ Halls[®] and Ricola[®] lozenges are helpful for cough suppression.
5. Mega-dosing of vitamins, Airborne[®] and other such supplements are likely to be more costly than helpful for the flu.

Be very careful about not using multiple OTC meds all with acetaminophen as an ingredient. Acetaminophen is toxic to the liver in above-prescribed doses. If you are using multiple ingredient products plus taking Tylenol[®] for fever, it is easy to inadvertently take too much acetaminophen. Remember that it is as important to be careful with OTC medication as it is with prescription medications.

6. Home remedies:
 - ♦ Salt water gargles (solution of 1 teaspoon salt in 8 ounces of water) can be gargled as often as needed for sore throat.
 - ♦ Honey in tea for cough. Chicken soup, canned or home-made, is a time-honored therapy, and it has been proven in small studies.

What are antiviral medications and when are they prescribed?

Antiviral drugs decrease the ability of flu viruses to reproduce, can shorten the time you are sick by 1 or 2 days and make you less contagious to other people. The medicine must be started within 2 days of becoming sick. Your practitioner will decide if the medications are indicated for you. Antiviral medicines are not antibiotics.

When do I need to call the Health Center or make an appointment?

- ♦ A fever over 100 degrees for more than 5 days
- ♦ A fever over 103 degrees
- ♦ Chest pain, wheezing or shortness of breath (expect the cough to last 2-3 weeks)
- ♦ Severe facial pain
- ♦ The worst headache you have ever had with no relief with Tylenol or ibuprofen.
- ♦ Symptoms that get worse after getting better
- ♦ Rash

You can learn more about influenza on-line at e Centers for Disease Control website: www.cdc.gov/flu/