

Influenza

Fact Sheet



What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza, or "flu", is caused by the influenza virus. Flu infects the nose, throat, and lungs.

What are the symptoms of flu?

Symptoms can include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Flu can cause a more severe illness than the common cold and can be life-threatening.

Children with flu may also have nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea, but this is uncommon in adults. Although the term "stomach flu" is sometimes used to describe vomiting, nausea, or diarrhea, these symptoms are usually caused by other viruses, bacteria, or parasites and are rarely related to flu.

When is the flu season in Maine?

It is generally October through May, although flu can occur year-round.

How does flu spread?

It is spread from person to person in droplets from coughs and sneezes. These droplets can travel up to 3 feet and land in the eyes, mouth, or nose of others. It is also possible to get flu from touching a surface that has the flu virus on it and then touching your eyes, mouth or nose before washing your hands.

Does flu cause complications?

Yes, they include: pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions (such as diabetes, asthma, or congestive heart failure). Children may get sinus problems and ear infections.

People at the highest risk are those who are:

- 65 years and older
- Less than 5 years, especially less than 2 years
- Any age with chronic medical conditions or who have weak immune systems
- Pregnant or recently had a baby
- Residents of nursing homes
- Under 19 years and on long-term aspirin therapy

- Very overweight
- American Indians/Alaska Natives

How is flu treated?

Rest and drinking fluids help you recover from flu. Drugs called antivirals can shorten the time you are sick with flu and may prevent serious complications. They work best when taken within 48 hours of when symptoms begin and are usually recommended for people who are at high risk for getting complications. Most healthy people do not need to be treated with antivirals.

How can I prevent getting flu?

The best way to prevent flu is to get a flu vaccine each year. The flu vaccine cannot cause flu. There are many different flu vaccines. Ask your healthcare provider which vaccine is right for you. It takes about 2 weeks after getting the vaccine to be protected.

Follow the "No Flu 4 You" approach:

1. Wash your hands
2. Cover your cough
3. Stay home when you are sick
4. Get vaccinated

How soon will I get sick if I am exposed to flu?
Symptoms begin 1 to 4 days after exposure, 2 days on average.

How do I know if I have flu?

It is hard to tell based on symptoms alone. A healthcare provider can swab your nose or throat to test for flu. Testing within 2 to 3 days after symptoms begin gives the best results. Your healthcare provider may also need to see you to prescribe medicine or to tell if you have another infection that is a complication of flu.

If I had flu last year, will I be protected this year?

It depends on the health of the person involved. Young, healthy people likely have good protection against the same or closely related strains of flu from one year to the next. However, people with weakened immune systems may not.

Flu viruses are always changing so protection will become weaker over time. There are also

different types of flu viruses circulating and the same type of flu viruses are not around every year. This is why it is important to get a vaccine each year.

How long is a person with flu virus contagious? It depends on the age and health of the person. Healthy adults may be able to infect others from 1 day before to 5 days after they first become sick. Young children and people with weakened immune systems may be contagious for longer than a week.

People with flu symptoms should stay home from work, school, and daycare until at least 24 hours after fever has resolved without the use of fever-reducing medicine like Tylenol or Advil.

How many people get sick or die from the flu every year? On average, about 5% to 20% of people in the U.S. get flu, and [more than 200,000 are hospitalized](#) for flu-related complications each year. About 36,000 Americans die per year from complications of flu.

How long can flu viruses live on hard surfaces (such as books, tables, and doorknobs)? They can survive on hard surfaces for 2 to 8 hours.

What kills the flu virus?

Flu virus is killed by heat (167-212°F [75-100°C]). Chlorine, hydrogen peroxide, soaps, iodine-based antiseptics, and alcohols are also effective against flu viruses if used properly. For example, gels with alcohol in them can be used to clean hands, but the gel should be rubbed until dry.

What is novel or variant flu?

Novel or variant flu is any type of flu that is not commonly seen. This can include flu viruses that are normally found in pigs, birds, dogs, bats, or other animals. How bad the novel strain is depends on many things, and may be different for each novel type.

Symptoms of novel flu are usually the same as regular flu. Lab testing is required to find out if a strain is common or novel. The “No Flu 4 You” approach should also be used to prevent novel flu.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website www.maine-flu.gov. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov/flu> – is another excellent source of health information.