



Patient Information

Staying Healthy During Flu Season

Up to 40% of the residents in your community will get the flu this winter. This handout is designed to ensure that you aren't part of this group.

What is the Flu?

Influenza or "flu" is an infection of the respiratory tract caused by the influenza virus.

It occurs in three forms, types A, B and C. Influenza A and B cause infection in humans; Influenza C causes infection in animals.

The virus typically incubates for 24 to 48 hours, and can affect people of any age and race.

The flu season is annual because the proteins that coat the virus change constantly, and our immune systems do not recognize and cannot protect us from the new strains. Thus, almost every year a new strain causes infections, and a vaccine cannot be developed until new viral strains are isolated.

How is Influenza Spread?

The influenza virus is spread through the air. Coughing by an infected person fills the air with microscopic droplets of influenza virus that are inhaled by others. Once the particles land on the lining of the nose, throat or airways, the virus starts reproducing quickly.

The flu has a rapid onset, with symptoms that are usually more severe than the common cold. In certain populations, such as the elderly or those with weakened immune systems, the flu can be quite severe. In most cases, the flu causes headache, fever, chills, muscle aches, an overall lousy feeling (malaise), cough and sore throat.

Stress, excessive fatigue and poor nutrition are some the main risk factors of contracting the flu. If you've had a recent illness that causes lower resistance, have a chronic illness (lung or heart disease or diabetes) or are pregnant, your risk for catching the flu is a bit higher than average. Students, office workers and health care providers who are in close proximity with others face an increased risk.

How Do I Prevent the Flu?

One of the best ways to prevent the flu is through vaccination every year. The shot can be given to adults and children of any age at any time during the flu season. If you're pregnant, it's safe to receive the injection in your second or third trimester.

If you're allergic to eggs, do not get a flu shot unless you have undergone desensitization. The viral material used in flu vaccines is grown in eggs, so the vaccine could trigger an allergic reaction. Also, if you have a fever, do not get vaccinated until the fever subsides.

Flu vaccination does not cause the flu, and side effects of vaccination are minor. If you have never received the vaccination or had the flu, you might experience fever, malaise and muscle aches. These reactions develop 6 to 12 hours after the injection and last for 1 or 2 days. In rare cases, patients may exhibit immediate reactions, such as hives, welts, wheezing and difficulty breathing, as a result of an allergic reaction to the vaccine.

During the flu season, try to avoid any unnecessary contact with people who have upper respiratory infections. In addition, watch your stress level, eat healthy and get plenty of rest.

You Have the Flu ... Now What?

Rest, plenty of fluids and comfort measures are the best strategies for coping with the flu. Your NP may recommend acetaminophen (Tylenol) to relieve aches and fever. For multiple symptoms, such as congestion, cough and a runny nose, a combination of a decongestant (Sudafed or Afrin) and an antihistamine (Benadryl, Dimetapp or Tavist) may be helpful. Cough suppressants, expectorants and local anesthetics might also be prescribed.

For the first 4 days, your NP will recommend bed rest and increased fluid intake. Resume your normal activities only after all your symptoms are gone.

—Information adapted from Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Influenza and the Common Cold by the American Lung Association, CDC fact sheets and www.OnHealth.com.

Additional Notes:

Your nurse practitioner has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about principles related to your medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your nurse practitioner.

