

What is influenza (also called flu)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu **vaccine** each year.

Signs and symptoms of flu

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:

- Fever* or feeling feverish/chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue (very tired)
- Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.



**It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.*

How flu spreads

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or possibly their nose.

Period of contagiousness

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day **before** symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days **after** becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time.

What are the benefits of flu vaccination?

While how well the flu vaccine works can vary, there are a lot of reasons to get a flu vaccine each year.

- Flu vaccination can keep you from getting sick from flu. Protecting yourself from flu also protects the people around you who are more vulnerable to serious flu illness.
- Flu vaccination can help protect people who are at greater risk of getting seriously ill from flu, like older adults, people with chronic health conditions and young children (especially infants younger than 6 months old who are too young to get vaccinated).
- Flu vaccination also may make your illness milder if you do get sick.
- Flu vaccination can reduce the risk of more serious flu outcomes, like hospitalizations and deaths.
 - Flu vaccination is an important preventive tool for people with chronic health conditions. Vaccination was associated with lower rates of some cardiac events among people with heart disease, especially among those who had had a cardiac event in the past year. Flu vaccination also has been shown to be associated with reduced hospitalizations among people with diabetes (79%) and chronic lung disease (52%).
 - Vaccination helps protect women during pregnancy and their babies for up to 6 months after they are born. One study showed that giving flu vaccine to pregnant women was 92% effective in preventing hospitalization of infants for flu.
 - Other studies have shown that vaccination can reduce the risk of flu-related hospitalizations in older adults. A study that looked at flu vaccine effectiveness over the course of three flu seasons estimated that flu vaccination lowered the risk of hospitalizations by 61% in people 50 years of age and older.

Myths about the Seasonal Flu and the Flu Vaccine:

#1 The seasonal flu is annoying but harmless.

Aside from the short-term misery and lost workdays, flu can have more serious implications. Sure, most people who get the seasonal flu recover just fine. But the seasonal flu also hospitalizes 200,000 people in the U.S. each year. It kills between 3,000 and 49,000 people. That's close to the number of women killed by breast cancer each year, and more than twice the number of people killed by AIDS.

#2 The flu vaccine can give you the flu.

Injected flu vaccines only contain dead virus, and a dead virus is, well, dead: it can't infect you. There is one type of live virus flu vaccine, the nasal vaccine, FluMist. But in this case, the virus is specially engineered to remove the parts of the virus that make people sick.

#3 There is no treatment for the flu.

Two antiviral drugs are highly effective against the flu: Tamiflu, in pill form, and Relenza, which is inhaled. These drugs are most effective if taken within 48 hours of your first flu symptoms. But the drugs are beneficial even if taken 48 hours after symptom onset.

Neither Tamiflu nor Relenza cures the flu. But they can reduce the amount of time you're sick by one or two days and make you less contagious to others. These drugs work with both the typical strains of seasonal flu as well as swine flu.

#4 Antibiotics can fight the flu.

Antibiotics only fight bacterial infections. Flu -- whether it's typical seasonal flu or swine flu -- is not caused by bacteria, but by a virus. So antibiotics have *absolutely no effect* on any kind of flu. But this message just won't sink in for some people.

#5 The flu is only dangerous for the elderly.

It's true that the people most likely to become seriously ill or die from the seasonal flu are over age 65. But flu can become risky for anyone, even healthy young adults. Some of the most susceptible people to seasonal influenza are young children.

#6 "Stomach flu" is a form of the flu.

The word "flu" is so overused that it's lost much of its actual meaning. Gastrointestinal viruses are called the "stomach flu," but they have no connection to the actual influenza virus. If you suffer vomiting and diarrhea, but no fever or body ache, you probably do not have the flu.

#7 If you get the flu, you can't get it again during the flu season.

That's not the case because flu infection can happen from more than one strain of virus.

#8 You can skip years between flu vaccinations.

The particular strains of flu that are dominant change every single year. So every single year, researchers have to develop a brand new vaccine.



For more information about influenza, please visit www.cdc.gov or call Dawn Ramsey, Infection Control Director at Sturgis Hospital 269.659.4295