

Understanding Influenza and How to Avoid It

Influenza, also known as the flu, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by viruses. It can be mild or severe, and can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each fall.

Every year in the United States, on average, 5 to 20 percent of the population gets the flu; more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications and approximately 36,000 people die from complications.

Symptoms and Complications

Symptoms of the flu include:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches

Gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, are much more common among children than adults.

Some of the complications caused by the flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections. Some people are at high risk for serious flu complications, such as older people, young children and people with certain health conditions, including pregnancy.

How Flu Spreads

The flu spreads in respiratory droplets caused by coughing and sneezing. It usually spreads from person to person, although occasionally a person may become infected by touching something with virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

Adults may be able to infect others beginning one day before getting symptoms and up to seven days after getting sick. That means that you can give someone the flu before you know you are sick as well as while you are sick.

Preventing the Flu

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each fall. There also are certain good health habits that can help prevent infection. In addition, antiviral medications may be used. The following health habits may also reduce your risk of getting the flu:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.
- If possible, stay home from work, school and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from catching your illness.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
- Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.

Handwashing and Hand Sanitizers

Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps you can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. It is best to wash hands with soap and running water for 20 seconds. If soap or clean, running water are not available, use an alcohol-based product containing at least 60 percent alcohol to clean hands. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are fast-acting and significantly reduce the number of many types of germs on the skin. However, they will not kill all germs.

Proper Washing Technique

- Wet hands with clean, running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds. (Need a timer? Hum the “Happy Birthday” song from beginning to end twice.)
- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use a paper towel to turn off the faucet.

Using an Alcohol-based Hand Rub

- Apply product to the palm of one hand, using the amount of product indicated on the label.
- Rub hands together.
- Rub the product over all surfaces of hands and fingers until hands are dry.

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