



Facts about Influenza (the Flu)

What is influenza?

Influenza, often called the flu, is an infection of the upper airway caused by an influenza virus.

Getting sick with influenza also puts you at risk of other infections. These include viral or bacterial pneumonia which affect the lungs. The risk of complications is greater for seniors 65 years and older, very young children, and people who have lung or heart diseases, certain chronic health conditions, or weakened immune systems.

Healthy pregnant women in the second half of their pregnancy are at greater risk of being hospitalized following infection with influenza virus.

In Canada, it is estimated that up to 8,000 people die from influenza and its complications during years with widespread or epidemic influenza activity.

How can influenza be prevented?

You can reduce the risk of getting influenza or spreading it to others by:

- washing your hands regularly,
- promptly disposing of used tissues in the waste basket or garbage,
- coughing and sneezing into your shirt sleeve rather than your hands,
- staying home when you are ill, and
- getting the influenza vaccine.

The influenza vaccine can help prevent you from getting sick with influenza or from spreading it to others. For more information on the influenza vaccine, see HealthLink BC File [#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#).

How does influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from person to person through coughing, sneezing, or having face-to-

face contact. The virus can also spread when a person touches tiny droplets from a cough or a sneeze on another person or object and then touches his or her own eyes, mouth or nose before washing their hands.

An infected person can spread the influenza virus even before feeling sick. An adult can spread the virus from about 1 day before to 5 days after symptoms start. Children can spread the virus up to 21 days after symptoms start.

What are the symptoms?

Influenza symptoms can include fever, headache, muscle pain, runny nose, sore throat, extreme tiredness, and cough. Children may also experience nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Although colds caused by other viruses may have similar symptoms, those due to the influenza virus tend to be worse.

Symptoms can begin about 1 to 4 days, or an average of 2 days, after a person is first exposed to the influenza virus. Fever and other symptoms can usually last up to 7 to 10 days, with the cough and weakness lasting 1 to 2 weeks longer.

Home Treatment

If you get sick with influenza, home treatment can help ease symptoms. Follow the self-care advice below:

- Get plenty of rest. Bed rest will also help you prevent spreading the virus to others.
- Drink extra fluids to replace those lost from fever.
- Avoid smoking and ask others not to smoke in the house.
- Breathe moist air from a hot shower or from a sink filled with hot water to help clear a stuffy nose.
- Anti-influenza drugs or antivirals are available by prescription, but these must be started early.

These will shorten symptoms by about 3 days if given within 12 hours and by about 1.5 days if given within 2 days of the start of symptoms. Over-the-counter medications can help relieve symptoms such as pain and fever. These are not recommended for children less than 6 years of age. Non-prescription medications for relief of influenza symptoms are also available at the pharmacy.

When should I see a doctor?

Consult your doctor early if you develop flu-like symptoms and you have a condition that puts you at higher risk of complications.

Antiviral medication is most effective if given within 48 hours once symptoms start, and the sooner the better. You should also call your doctor if your symptoms get worse, such as shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chest pain, or signs of dehydration (dizziness when standing, low urine output).

Is it influenza or a cold?

The following table can help you determine whether you have influenza or a cold.

| <i>Symptoms</i> | <i>Cold</i> | <i>Influenza (the flu)</i> |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Fever | Rare | Usual, sudden onset 39°-40°, lasts 3 to 4 days |
| Headache | Rare | Usual, can be severe |
| Aches and Pains | Sometimes mild | Usual, often severe |
| Fatigue and weakness | Sometimes mild | Usual, may last 2-3 weeks or more |
| Extreme fatigue | Unusual | Usual, early onset, can be severe |
| Runny, stuffy nose | Common | Sometimes |
| Sneezing | Common | Sometimes |
| Sore throat | Common | Sometimes |
| Chest discomfort, coughing | Sometimes mild to moderate | Usual, can be severe |
| Complications | Can lead to sinus congestion or earache | Can lead to pneumonia, respiratory failure, and more complications in persons with chronic diseases |
| Prevention | Frequent hand washing | Yearly influenza vaccine and frequent hand washing |
| Treatment | No specific treatment is available; symptom relief only | Anti-viral drugs by prescription, which can reduce symptoms |

For more information, see the following HealthLink BC Files:

[#12a Why Seniors Should Get the Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#)

[#12c Influenza \(Flu\) Immunization: Myths and Facts](#)

[#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#)

[#85 Hand Washing for Parents and Kids](#)

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