

## **Influenza General Public Fact Sheet**

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### **Influenza**

Influenza is a highly contagious viral infection that affects mainly the nose, throat, chest and lungs. The flu may cause mild to severe illness, and may even lead to death. In the very young, the elderly, and those with other serious medical conditions, infection can lead to severe complications such as pneumonia.

### **Symptoms of Influenza**

- Fever (typically =100° F)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Stomach symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, also can occur but are more common in children than adults

### **Emergency Warning Signs of Influenza**

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

### **Infectious Period**

People may be able to infect each other one day before symptoms occur and up to 10 days after being sick.

### **The Spread of Influenza**

Flu viruses mainly spread from person to person through coughing or sneezing of people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five days after becoming sick. That means that 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.

### **How can you prevent the flu?**

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each year. There are two types of vaccines:

- The “flu” shot- an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people six months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine- a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine” or FluMist®). LAIV is approved for use in healthy people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses.

### **If you get the flu:**

- Stay home from work or school
- Make sure and get plenty of rest and water
- Over-the-counter medications may relieve symptoms
- Consult your doctor

### **Why you should get the flu vaccine every year**

The influenza virus changes every year as it makes its way around the world. Since the exact flu viruses are almost never the same from year to year, the strains of influenza in the vaccine changes each year. This is why you need to get a new flu vaccine every year. The vaccine only protects you from influenza for one year.

### **Vaccination**

Yearly flu vaccination should begin as soon as the vaccine is available, usually early in the fall. This will provide protection for the entire flu season.

### **Who should get vaccinated?**

Yearly flu vaccination is recommended for almost everyone over 6 months of age, and is especially important for those people at high risk for developing flu-related complications, such as children younger than five; adults 65 years of age and older; pregnant women; and people with certain medical conditions like heart and lung problems, and diabetes.

### **The Nasal Spray Vaccine**

Vaccination with the nasal spray flu vaccine (FluMist®) is an option for healthy people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant, even healthy persons who live with or care for those in a high risk group. The one exception is healthy persons who care for persons with severely weakened immune systems who require a protected environment; these healthy persons should get the inactivated vaccine.

### **Antiviral Medications**

Influenza antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid, or an inhaler) that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. Antiviral drugs can make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. This could be especially important for people at high risk. These medications are only effective if started within 48 hours after symptoms start. Influenza antiviral medication may also be used to prevent sickness in people who have been exposed to someone with influenza. People with high risk conditions (including those over age 65, those with immune compromising conditions, those with chronic illness, those who are over weight, and pregnant women) are more likely to be hospitalized or die from the flu and prompt treatment may help prevent or lessen the disease.

### **What should I do to protect myself and my family from the flu?**

- Washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 15-20 seconds. Wash your hands before and after eating, going to the bathroom, or touching pets, phones, or keyboards.
- Stay home from work or school when you are ill, and encourage others to do the same.
- Stay away from others you know are ill. You are less likely to become ill if you stay at least three feet from someone who is coughing or sneezing.
- Vaccination. The first line of defense against influenza is to get your influenza vaccination each year.
- Contact your health care provider. If you experience flu-like symptoms contact your physician. Your physician may be able to prescribe antiviral medications for you to shorten the duration of the illness and prevent transmission.
- Clean frequently and appropriately. Frequently clean commonly used surfaces, such as door handles, handrails, eating surfaces, toys, and phones. Commercial

disinfectants or bleach solutions should be used. (Mixing  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup bleach with 1 gallon of water makes bleach solution.) Some viruses can live from 20 minutes up to two hours or more on some surfaces.