

Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection caused by a virus. It is spread from person to person by tiny drops produced during a cough or sneeze and by hand to hand contact. While we often call it the "flu", the common cold is rarely due to the influenza virus. True influenza causes a much more severe illness than the usual cold.

What happens when you get influenza?

After infection, it takes 1-3 days for symptoms to develop. Healthy people mostly have symptoms of a sore throat, dry cough, nausea and sore eyes. Fever, chills, muscle aches and pains, loss of appetite occur in more severe cases.

These symptoms usually settle after a week. You often feel very tired for days or even weeks after the flu. Breathlessness can occur if more severe complications such as pneumonia develop.

When is Influenza considered serious?

Influenza can be severe or even fatal if a person is not in good health to begin with. The body and its defences can also become so weakened by influenza that other infections can occur. Pneumonia, sinusitis, airway or inner ear infection may occur. Rare and sometimes fatal problems include inflammation of the brain and nervous system and kidneys. Influenza can also worsen other problems such as diabetes, chronic bronchitis or heart failure.

Who gets Influenza?

Who are more susceptible to the serious complications of influenza?

Health problems which make people more likely to develop the complications of influenza include:

- Chronic lung disease including asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, bronchiectasis and cystic fibrosis.
- Pregnancy.
- Heart disease.
- Kidney disease.
- Diabetes.
- Severe anaemia.
- Frail and elderly people.
- People taking corticosteroids or other drugs that reduce immunity.

How are influenza and its complications treated?

Bed rest helps muscle aches and pains and paracetamol helps lower fever. Aspirin is also useful for fever and pain in adults but is not used in young children due to the risk of liver disease (Reye's Syndrome).

A drug called Amantadine[™] can be given to those with life threatening disease, although it has significant side effects. Some complications require antibiotics. People with chronic lung disease are often given

antibiotics the moment flu is diagnosed to prevent the other infections.

Two new treatments for influenza are now available, Relenza and Tamiflu. However both of these medications only help if they are taken within 48 hours of developing symptoms. Neither medication has any effect on the common cold, and they are not recommended for use in children under 12 years of age. Neither of these newer medications has any major side effects.

How is influenza and its problems prevented?

Prevention is the best treatment. A healthy lifestyle, proper diet, not smoking and exercise will all help.

Vaccination is an effective way of avoiding the flu. Unlike other infectious diseases, the flu virus changes and different varieties occur each year. That means that vaccines need to be changed on a yearly basis. This ensures they are effective against the virus type most likely to affect the community in the coming season.

All high risk persons should be vaccinated with a new vaccine each year since yearly vaccination has been found to be effective in preventing severe symptoms. It can be lifesaving in many cases.

Doctors, nurses and others caring for high risk people should be vaccinated. Medical staff and nurses looking after patients with immunity problems should also be vaccinated.

Can you get influenza from the vaccine?

It is impossible to get influenza from the vaccine. Unfortunately the vaccine is given at a time when other flu-like illnesses circulate within the community and any symptoms you get at this time may be due to other infections caught around the time of vaccination. The influenza vaccine contains strains of the vaccine that have been killed and broken apart. What is actually given by injection is only the part of the virus that will protect you from the disease.

Good hand hygiene can also help prevent the flu. According to a small Swiss study the influenza virus can live on a person's fingers for up to 30 minutes, depending on the size of the flu droplet. Although most person-to-person flu transmission tends to be airborne via respiratory droplets when people sneeze, cough or talk, you can also get the flu if you touch your eyes, nose or mouth with contaminated fingers. The study illustrates the importance of good hand hygiene - wash often with soap and water or a hand sanitizer if they're not available.

Other simple steps you can take to prevent the spread of germs include:

- keeping your hands away from your face
- covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze and cough
- trying not to come into contact with people who are sick
- stay home when you're sick.

What about reactions to the vaccine?

Most people have little or no reaction to the vaccine injection. One in four might have a swollen red tender area where the vaccine was given. Occasionally slight fever and chills, or even worsening of chest symptoms may occur in those who already have chest disease. These rarely last longer than one or two days. Because the vaccine is produced in eggs, people who are allergic to eggs should not receive the vaccine unless it is absolutely necessary.

Can you get influenza more than once?

A person can have influenza more than once because there are 3 flu virus families (A, B and C). Within each family are many strains against which your immunity (antibody levels) may be less effective or ineffective against an unfamiliar strain.

Every 10 years or so, a very different strain appears which may cause a major world-wide epidemic. This occurs when a population does not have any immunity against that new strain. One such influenza epidemic in 1918 left more than 20 million people dead.

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