



## **Dartmouth College Health Service**

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## **Influenza**

### **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. In the United States, millions of people are sickened, thousands hospitalized and thousands of people die of flu related complications each year.
- The most important step in preventing flu for you and the community is to get a flu vaccination each year as soon as it becomes available. CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a flu vaccine yearly.
- The flu vaccine is made with a “inactivated” virus so does not cause flu (a common myth).
- Flu seasons (typically peaking November through March) vary in severity depending on: the characteristics of circulating viruses, how well the vaccine is protecting against influenza strains, and how many people got vaccinated.

### **Flu Symptoms**

Influenza usually comes on suddenly and may include some or all of these symptoms:

- Fever of 100.6 or more, or feeling feverish/chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Less commonly nausea, vomiting, diarrhea (more common in children than adults)

### **Do other viruses circulate during the flu season?**

Several other non-flu respiratory viruses also circulate during the flu season including rhinovirus (one cause of the “common cold”), causing symptoms that though typically milder can mimic the flu. Influenza is different from a common cold. Also, many people use the term “flu” to describe illnesses with nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. While stomach symptoms can sometimes be related to the influenza, these problems are rarely the main symptoms of influenza.

### **How Flu Spreads**

- 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 (within 3-6 feet). 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.
- 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 or get infected for an even longer time.
- The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1 to 4 days, with an average of about 2 days.

### **Flu Complications/People at High Risk from Flu**

- Most people who get influenza will recover in a few days to less than two weeks, but some people may develop life-threatening complications.
- Pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus and ear infections, dehydration are examples of complications from flu. The flu can also make chronic health problems worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks triggered by the flu.
- Some people are at high risk of developing serious flu-related complications and should start anti-viral medicine as soon as possible after the onset of symptoms. These include people regardless of age with certain chronic medical conditions (such as significant asthma, diabetes, heart, lung, neurologic, liver, blood disease, immunosuppressive illness or medication), pregnant/nursing women, those 65 and older, and young children.
- If you have flu and are living with someone with the risk factors for complications listed above, in some cases preventative anti-viral medicines are recommended.

### **Diagnosing Flu during Flu Season**

Flu is often diagnosed “clinically” by your provider, just based on your symptoms. At other times, a flu test will be advised, using a tiny Q-tip to sample mucus from the nasopharynx, up one nostril to the top of the throat.

### **Treating Flu with Antiviral Drugs (for example Tamiflu)**

- Antiviral drugs prescribed by your provider can make the course of flu a little milder and may shorten the time you are sick. They may also prevent serious flu complications, like pneumonia.
- Antiviral drugs should be used early to treat people who are very sick with the flu (for example -hospitalized), and people who are sick with the flu who have a greater chance of developing serious complications.
- Studies show that flu antiviral drugs work best when they are started within 2 days of getting sick. However, starting them later can still be helpful, especially if the sick person has a high-risk health condition or is very sick from the flu.
- Your provider's advice about whether you need an antiviral drug may vary year to year, depending on advisories from the CDC and NH Department of Health about how virulent the flu is in any given season.
- Many healthy people elect not to take an antiviral medicine after discussion with a provider, but rather use symptom relief and let the flu run its course.

### **Relief of Flu Symptoms**

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) and/or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) can be taken singly, or in alternating fashion (see patient education series handout Pain and Fever Relief for instructions) to keep your fever down, and help with headache, body aches, sore throat.
- Do not take aspirin as this can be associated with an adverse neurological problem.
- Check your temp at intervals while sick, before you take your fever reducers. Health Services can provide you with disposable thermometers.
- Drink plenty of fluids: suggestions include water, salty broth, diluted fruit juices or Powerade, vegetable juices, decaffeinated tea, hot water with honey and lemon, Jell-o or popsicles.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes.
- Soothe your throat with salt water gargles (1/2 teaspoon salt in 8 ounces of warm water) or cough lozenges.
- Sleep/rest in bed
- Keep away from others as much as possible, ideally at least 6 ft apart: remain in a room separate from common areas in your residence hall/home; keep the door to your room closed; use a separate bathroom if possible.
- Consider a mask (obtain at Health Services) if you can't avoid common areas.
- Ask those in your household/suite/room to wash their hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.