

# The Flu

The flu is an illness caused by the flu (influenza) virus. The flu is usually worse than a cold. It attacks the nose, throat, and lungs and can cause mild to severe illness. The flu can sometimes lead to other problems like pneumonia, ear and sinus problems, dehydration, worsening of asthma, or sometimes even death. For most of us, the flu will go away in 1 to 2 weeks.

## How can I catch the flu?

- The flu is easily passed from person to person by coughing and sneezing.
- A person can also get the flu by touching something with the flu virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

## What are the signs of the flu?

- Fever
- Cough
- Feeling very tired
- Sore throat
- Headache and muscle ache
- Runny or stuffy nose

## Who is most at risk for more serious problems if they get the flu?

Everyone is at risk for getting the flu, but some people can get very sick. Those most at risk of serious problems include:

- Older adults.
- Very young children.
- Adults and children who have certain health problems like

heart or kidney disease, asthma, or diabetes.

- People with HIV/AIDS, cancer, or any health problem that makes it harder to fight off disease.
- People who live in nursing homes.

These people should call their doctor or clinic if they have flu-like symptoms.

## Health care workers should get a flu shot so they do not pass the flu to patients.

## What can I do to keep from getting the flu?

There is no way to make sure that you won't get the flu. But there are some steps you can take to lower your chances:

- Getting a flu shot or spray (vaccine) is the most important step to take. Get one every year. The best time to get it is in the fall before flu season starts. You can also get one in the winter at the peak of the flu season.
- Wash your hands often.
- Ask your doctor or clinic about drugs that can keep you from getting the flu. No medicine can take the place of the flu vaccine.

## What is a vaccine?

- A vaccine prepares your body in advance to fight disease. The flu vaccine can be a shot or a spray into your nose.



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## What is the flu vaccine?

- The “flu shot” is made from a dead flu virus and is given with a needle, usually in the arm. It can be used in people older than 6 months of age.
- The nasal spray flu vaccine is made from a weakened form of the live flu virus and is sprayed in the nose. It can be used in people between the ages of 2 to 49 years.
- People who are allergic to eggs or who have had a reaction to the flu shot or vaccine should not be given the flu shot or nasal flu spray. Also, talk to your doctor if you have a history of Guillain-Barre’ syndrome.

## How well does the flu vaccine work?

- Every year the flu vaccine is changed to match the strains of virus that are most likely to be going around. The closer the match between the strains going around and the strains in the vaccine, the better the protection.
- It is always possible that the vaccine will not be an exact match to the strains that end up causing the most illness. It may still protect you, and may reduce symptoms and other problems that come from the flu.

## Are there drugs to treat the flu? Yes, there are a number of medicines that may help you feel better.

- Prescription medicines can lessen the time that you have symptoms. Your doctor or clinic can help you decide whether these drugs are right for you.

- Over-the-counter medicines can help with flu symptoms such as sore throat, stuffy nose, cough, fever, and body aches.

However:

- o Never give aspirin to children or teens who have signs of the flu. It can cause serious problems or even death. Call your doctor or clinic if your child is already taking aspirin for another reason and you think she or he has the flu.
- o If you already take any medicines, ask your doctor or pharmacist which medicines you can use to safely treat flu symptoms. For example, some over-the-counter medicines to treat a stuffy nose (decongestants) can raise your blood pressure or even make your blood pressure medicines less effective.
- o No medicine can take the place of the flu vaccine.
- Many other diseases can feel like the flu, but they need different treatments. Always go to your doctor or clinic if you feel worse.

## What should I do if I get the flu?

- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink lots of water or other liquids like juice and soup.
- Don’t smoke or drink alcohol.
- Don’t spread your germs. Cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, then throw the tissue away. Wash your hands often. Stay home if you can.

**FDA Office of Women’s Health** <http://www.fda.gov/womens>

## To Learn More:

### FDA Center for Drug Evaluation and Research

Phone: 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332)

<http://www.fda.gov/cder/drug/antivirals/influenza/default.htm>

### FDA Center for Biologics Evaluation Research

<http://www.fda.gov/cber/flu/flu.htm>