

Preparing for Flu Season

An estimated 10-20 percent of the population gets influenza (or “the flu”) during the annual flu season, which generally lasts from December thru March. Influenza is a viral respiratory infection of the nose, throat, and lungs, and is different from the digestive illness commonly called the “stomach flu.”

The influenza virus is highly contagious, and is spread when an infected person touches or shakes hands with someone, sneezes or coughs without covering their mouth, or touches objects that other people also handle.

Influenza symptoms include:

- Fever, often 102-104 degrees Fahrenheit, that may last up to seven days
- Headache and body aches
- Noticeable fatigue lasting from two to three weeks
- Coughing, stuffy nose, and sore throat

Flu symptoms are similar to cold symptoms, but tend to last longer and be more severe. Though the flu is usually not life threatening, it can lead to serious complications, including pneumonia and bronchitis. People over 65, young children, and those with chronic illness are more susceptible to flu complications.

Because influenza is a viral infection, it cannot be treated with antibiotics. However, prescription antiviral medications may reduce the severity and shorten the length of the flu if they are taken within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

The best way to avoid the flu is to get a flu vaccination (or “flu shot”), which usually becomes available in September or October of each year. A person needs a new flu shot every year. Other steps you can take to prevent the flu include:



- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 15-30 seconds. This is especially important after you have handled doorknobs, gas pumps, money, telephones, toys, or other items that multiple people may touch.
- Keep your hands away from your nose, eyes, and mouth, especially when you are out in public. If flu germs get on your hands, you can infect yourself by rubbing your eyes or touching your nose or mouth.
- Avoid touching or leaning against counters when you are at a store, bank, or restaurant. If the business provides hand sanitizer or disinfectant wipes, use them.
- Keep your distance from people who are coughing and sneezing or who say they have the flu. If you have symptoms, stay home to avoid spreading the virus.
- Don't share eating or grooming items with others. Towels, washcloths, silverware, glasses, and toothbrushes are prime candidates for spreading the virus.
- Maintain your resistance to infection with a good diet (including lots of fluids), plenty of rest, and regular exercise.
- If you are caring for someone with the flu, wash your hands frequently and try to get lots of rest. Be aware that your odds of getting the flu increase when you are caring for someone who has it.

For more information about how to avoid the flu or to learn more about the flu shot, contact your physician.

The above information is for educational purposes only and is not intended to take the place of medical advice.