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Influenza Symptoms And Cause Of Influenza

What is Influenza Or Flu And What Causes Flu?



[caption id="" align="alignright" width="150" caption="Influenza Sufferer"]

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Like a cold, influenza or flu means you have picked up a virus, which is passed on by coughing, sneezing or physical contact. In both cases you cannot treat or cure the infection itself, only its symptoms. Antibiotics will make no difference to flu unless you have a 'secondary' infection of the middle ear or chest.

A heavy cold can easily be mistaken for influenza, although flu is much less common and often spreads rapidly as an outbreak or, worse, an epidemic. The effects of flu, which infects the body's breathing passages or respiratory tract, are more severe and can take longer to clear up than cold symptoms.

Flu is not normally dangerous, unless it strikes someone who is already ill or weak, or triggers off acute pneumonia - which is rare. If you are in a high-risk group you can arrange for an annual flu vaccination, which is around 70 per cent effective at preventing infection.

Catching one of the three main types of flu virus (A, B and C) will give you resistance to that particular virus in the future. Unfortunately, type B and (especially) type A produce new strains that your body's natural defences cannot recognise or fight off - so you may get flu again and again.

How Do I Know If I Have Influenza?

Flu often comes on quite suddenly. The first symptoms are usually a fever, shivering, weakness, a headache, aching muscles and bones, tiredness and loss of appetite. A cough, sore throat and runny nose will normally follow.

After a couple of days your temperature will probably come down and the initial symptoms should be gone within a week. The cough, sore throat and runny nose will take longer, however, and you may feel tired and under the weather for a good two weeks.

What Can I Do Immediately To Make My Influenza better?

- Rest in bed and make sure your room is warm and well-ventilated.
- Soothe your throat and replace lost fluids by having plenty to drink. A hot drink made with honey and lemon or blackcurrant is preferable to tea or coffee.
- Do not smoke as this will make your symptoms worse.
- Try to eat a little, even if you do not feel up to it. If children are reluctant to eat, you could try extra drinks and semi-solid foods such as porridge or yoghurt.
- Treat your symptoms as you would those of a heavy cold - e.g., painkillers for a headache and fever, throat lozenges or gargling salt water for a sore throat, steam inhalations or cough medicines for a cough.

- Bring down a child's temperature by sponging with lukewarm water.
 - Remember to cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze, put your hand over your mouth when you cough and wash your hands regularly. This will help to avoid spreading infection.
 - Do not rush back to work as soon as you feel better. Allow time for a full recovery.
- What can I do generally to avoid catching flu?
- Steer clear of people who have the virus.
 - Avoid places that are crowded or badly ventilated, particularly in winter when flu is more common.
 - During the winter months, stay fit and healthy (and keep your body's natural defences in shape) by eating and sleeping properly. Too much stress or a hectic lifestyle can lower your resistance to infection.
 - Ask your doctor about having a flu vaccination if you are elderly and living in a nursing or residential home, over 80 years old, pregnant or have:
 - a chronic respiratory disorder such as bronchitis, asthma, emphysema or cystic fibrosis
 - a chronic heart condition
 - diabetes
 - kidney disease
 - liver disease
 - reduced resistance to infection, e.g., if you are having chemotherapy.

What Treatments Can I Buy Without A Prescription?

Your pharmacist will stock a variety of products for relieving the symptoms of flu, either separately or in combination. Some products, for example, contain a strong dose of painkiller together with ingredients for cough and a blocked or runny nose.

Ask your pharmacist which product is best for you and be careful not to mix products with the same ingredients in them. If your child has flu, get advice from your pharmacist on suitable medicines. Never give aspirin to a child under 12 years old.

For adults, paracetamol is useful for relieving a headache and bringing down a fever, while aching muscles and bones can be eased with soluble aspirin or ibuprofen every four to six hours (do not exceed the recommended doses).

When Do I Need To See A Doctor?

- If you are elderly or frail.
- If your temperature rises above 40°C.
- If your child's temperature stays above 39°C for more than 24 hours.
- If your baby's temperature is higher than 38.5°C.
- If you still have a fever after four days.
- If you are in a high-risk category (see above).
- If your symptoms get worse, you develop chest pain or are short of breath.
- If you are coughing up yellow or greenish phlegm.
- If you have severe earache.
- If you were recently in a country where there is a risk of malaria.
- If your baby or child is refusing to drink.
- If your child is sick and starts behaving strangely.

You Should Contact A Doctor Immediately If:

- Your child is weak.

- Your child is having problems breathing.
- Your child seems to find it painful breathing in.
- Your child has diarrhoea and is vomiting or refusing to drink.
- You, your child or baby show any signs of meningitis, e.g.

- ▣ a high temperature
- ▣ a persistent headache
- ▣ a stiff neck
- ▣ nausea or vomiting
- ▣ drowsiness or confusion
- ▣ dislike of bright light
- ▣ a red/blue skin rash

Babies

- ▣ a tight or bulging fontanelle (the soft spot on top of a baby's head)
- ▣ listlessness
- ▣ a blank expression
- ▣ heavy or repeated vomiting
- ▣ refusal to feed
- ▣ high-pitched crying
- ▣ an arched back
- ▣ pale or blotchy skin with red or blue/black bruises

Note: Babies may display these symptoms without having a fever.

In Summary ...

- Rest in bed and stay at home until you have fully recovered.
- Have plenty of fluids, particularly hot drinks to soothe your throat.
- Try to eat
- Treat your symptoms with home remedies or non-prescription medicines such as painkillers.
- Call a doctor if you develop worrying symptoms or are in an at-risk group.

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