

# Influenza: Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones

by Julie Brady, MD  
Family Practitioner, Colorado Springs Health Partners, PC

Along with colder days come the seasonal winter colds and dreaded flu. While few of us can escape the common cold, we can help protect ourselves against the flu. Influenza, commonly known as “the flu,” is a contagious viral infection of the respiratory tract. And, although it affects both women and men and all age groups, children seem to get it more often than adults.

## Symptoms

Often, there is confusion between the flu and the common cold. Both are prevalent during the winter months, especially November through March. While they share some common symptoms, colds are typically not accompanied by fever, chills, or overall achiness. The most common flu symptoms include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness and fatigue
- Sore throat
- Chills
- Muscle aches and stiffness
- Dry cough
- Runny/Stuffiness nose



Fever usually accompanies the flu, not a cold.

Symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea are much more common among children than adults. Typically, after 3 to 5 days the most severe symptoms are improved, but cough and fatigue may continue for up to two weeks.

The flu is spread primarily by droplets that are coughed or sneezed into the air. People who have the flu can be contagious from one day prior to their own symptoms appearing, and for up to 5 days after becoming sick. The virus can also survive on surfaces such as doorknobs and phones for up to 8 hours. A person can become infected by touching one of these surfaces and then his or her mouth or nose. Because the flu virus is so easily transferable, it is not uncommon to see an entire school or workplace affected within 2 or 3 weeks of the first outbreak.

## Prevention

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated. The best time for vaccination is in the Fall, prior to the start of the flu season. However, it is seldom too late to get a flu shot, so if in doubt discuss your options with your health care provider. Anyone wanting to avoid the flu should get vaccinated, but some people at higher risk should make sure to get a vaccination every year. People who should prioritize flu vaccination include:

- People 50 years of age or older
- Children between 6 months and 5 years of age
- Women more than 3 months pregnant during the flu season
- People who live in long-term care facilities
- People with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, asthma, heart disease, nerve disorders, kidney disease, or immune deficiency

People who should not get the flu vaccine include anyone allergic to eggs and egg products, infants under

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6 months old, anyone who has ever had an allergic reaction to a flu vaccination, anyone with Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS), or anyone sick with a fever.

### **How the vaccine works:**

The vaccine is given as an injection, and contains killed flu viruses. This will not cause you to get the flu, but instead causes your body to fight off infection by the live flu virus. Getting the shot will protect you against the particular type of flu in the vaccine, but not all flu viruses. The vaccine is updated each year to include the most current strains of the virus, and reduces your chances of catching the flu by as much as 80%. And, a person vaccinated who does get the flu will usually have fewer and milder symptoms than those not vaccinated.

### **Along with the vaccine, there are other ways you can protect against the flu:**

- wash your hands thoroughly and frequently. If using a hand sanitizer gel, rub your hands together until they are dry
- avoid close contact with people who are sick
- stay home when you are sick to help prevent spreading the disease
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing
- avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- take anti-viral medication
- don't share cups or utensils

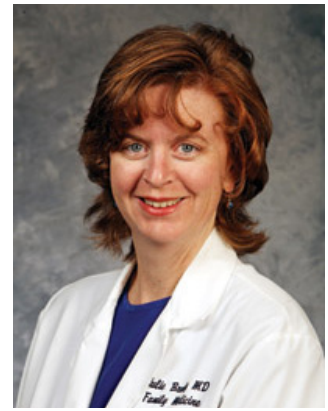
Tests are now available to determine if you have the flu within the first 2 to 3 days after symptoms begin. People age 65 years and older, people with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women, and children between ages 6 months and 23 months of age are at increased risk for serious complications from the flu and should contact their physician if symptoms begin.

### **Treatment**

Despite our best efforts, an estimated 10%-20% of U.S. residents get the flu each year. While there is no "cure" for the flu, if diagnosed within the first 48 hours of symptoms, a physician may prescribe an antiviral medication that can ease symptoms. Contact your physician if your symptoms get worse, fever last for more than 48 hours, or if symptoms are unusually severe, such as trouble breathing. Otherwise, simple at-home remedies will aid in recovery from the flu:

- Take it easy, and get plenty of sleep. Lack of adequate rest can prolong the symptoms.
- Drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration. This is especially important if symptoms include vomiting or diarrhea.
- Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen to relieve fever and achiness. NEVER give aspirin to children or teenagers without speaking to their doctor first.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco

While the flu rarely requires medical treatment, it can lead to other serious health problems, especially for people at high-risk. Possible complications include pneumonia, encephalitis, bronchitis, sinus and ear infections. A thorough physical exam, chest x-ray, and blood work may be needed for a complete diagnosis.



**Julie Brady, MD**

Family Practitioner  
CSHP West branch  
2020 W. Colorado Ave.

**473-1191**



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