

# Influenza

## Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease  
Control and Prevention

An Office of the  
Department of Health and Human Services

### What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza, commonly called "the flu," is caused by the influenza virus, which infects the respiratory tract (nose, throat, lungs). Unlike many other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, the flu causes severe illness and life-threatening complications in many people.

### What are the symptoms of the flu?

Influenza is a respiratory illness. Symptoms of flu include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Children can have additional gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults. Although the term "stomach flu" is sometimes used to describe vomiting, nausea, or diarrhea, these illnesses are caused by certain other viruses, bacteria, or possibly parasites, and are rarely related to influenza.

### When is the flu season in Maine?

In Maine, the peak of flu season usually occurs anywhere from December through March. The overall health impact (e.g., infections, hospitalizations, and deaths) of a flu season varies from year to year. Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) monitors disease activity and provides influenza reports each week from October through May.

### How does the flu spread?

The main way that the influenza virus is spread is from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes (This is called "droplet spread"). This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled (generally up to 3 feet) through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby. The viruses also can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

### Does the flu have complications?

Yes. Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

Children may get sinus problems and ear infections as complications from the flu. Those aged 65 years and older and persons of any age with chronic medical conditions are at highest risk for serious complications of flu.

### How can I prevent getting the flu?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccination each year. There are two types of vaccines:

- The "flu shot" – an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people 6 months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine – a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for "Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine"). LAIV is approved for use in healthy people 2 years to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses.

### What are other steps that can be taken to prevent the flu?

There are other good health habits that can help prevent the flu. These are:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.
- If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from catching your illness.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and wash your hands after. Or you can cough or sneeze into your shirt sleeve near your elbow. This will help protect those around you from getting sick.
- Wash your hands often – it will help protect you from germs.

- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

### **How soon will I get sick if I am exposed to the flu?**

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about one to four days, with an average of about two days.

### **How do I find out if I have the flu?**

It is very difficult to distinguish the flu from other viral or bacterial causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. A lab test can confirm that an illness is influenza if the patient is tested within the first two to three days after symptoms begin. In addition, a doctor's examination may be needed to determine whether a person has another infection that is a complication of influenza.

### **If I got the flu last year, will I have immunity against the flu this year?**

In general, a person who is infected with an influenza virus one year will have some immunity to closely related viruses that may persist for one or more years. For example, if someone was infected with a specific strain of influenza that circulates during one year, they are likely to have some natural immunity that will give them protection if they are exposed to that strain or a closely related strain again during the next year. The degree of protection depends on the health of the person involved. Young and healthy people with strong immune systems will likely have good immunity against the same or closely related strains of virus from one year to the next. However, people with weakened immune systems are less likely to have immunity that carries over in other years.

It's important to remember that influenza viruses are constantly changing so antibody made against one strain will become less effective against new strains as influenza strains evolve over time. In addition, there are different types of influenza viruses circulating and different variants within virus types, and the same type of flu virus does not necessarily circulate each year.

### **How long is a person with flu virus contagious?**

The period when an infected person is contagious depends on the age and health of the person. Studies show that most healthy adults may be able to infect others from 1 day prior to becoming sick to 5 days after they first develop symptoms. Some young children and people with weakened immune systems may be contagious for longer than a week.

### **How many people get sick or die from the flu every year?**

Each flu season is unique, but it is estimated that, on average, approximately 5% to 20% of U.S. residents get the flu, and more than 200,000 persons are hospitalized for flu-related complications each year. About 36,000 Americans die on average per year from the complications of flu.

### **How long can human influenza viruses live on inanimate items (such as books and doorknobs)?**

Studies have shown that human influenza viruses generally can survive on surfaces for between 2 and 8 hours.

### **What kills influenza virus?**

Influenza virus is destroyed by heat (167-212°F [75-100°C]). In addition, several chemical germicides, including chlorine, hydrogen peroxide, detergents (soap), iodophors (iodine-based antiseptics), and alcohols are effective against influenza viruses if used in proper concentration for sufficient length of time. For example, wipes or gels with alcohol in them can be used to clean hands. The gels should be rubbed until they are dry.

### **Where can I get more information?**

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov>. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> - is another excellent source of health information.