

# Your Health Is in Your Hands

How to care for yourself and others with influenza



*“ If a Pandemic hits our shores, it will affect almost every sector of our society, not just health care, but transportation systems, workplaces, schools, public safety, and more. It will require a coordinated government-wide response, including Federal, State, and local governments, and it will require the private sector and all of us as individuals to be ready.”*

*~ Secretary Mike Leavitt  
Department of Health  
& Human Services*

## What's Inside

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This booklet gives valuable information on:

- How to prevent influenza.
- How to help yourself and others when influenza happens.
- When to seek medical care.

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# Influenza 101

## What is Influenza?

**INFLUENZA IS** an infection of the lungs and airways caused by a virus. Various strains of influenza virus circulate throughout the world each year. In North America, influenza usually affects people between November and April.

The influenza virus often changes slightly. Most people who have had influenza will have some protection against the changed virus. However, three to four times each century the influenza virus changes in a major way. People will not have any protection against this “new” strain and the virus will spread rapidly around the world. This global epidemic (pandemic) can cause serious illness and death.

## How is Influenza Spread?

The influenza virus passes from person to person by droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. Airborne droplets can enter the body through the eyes, nose, or mouth. The virus, contained in droplets, can travel three to six feet in the air. It can live on hard surfaces for one to two days; on cloth, tissue, and paper for eight to twelve hours; and on hands for five minutes. People develop symptoms of influenza from one to three days after becoming infected. They are contagious from the day BEFORE they have the first symptoms until five days after the symptoms start.

## What are the Symptoms?

Symptoms of influenza include:

- sudden fever of 100.4°F or higher.
- dry cough.
- aching body, especially head, lower back, and legs.
- extreme weakness and tiredness.

Other symptoms can include:

- chills.
- aching behind the eyes.
- loss of appetite.
- sore throat.
- runny or stuffy nose.

Fever usually goes down and the person starts to feel better in three to five days. Tiredness and cough can continue for several weeks. Seniors and children may also experience vomiting, diarrhea, or stomach pain. For people older than 75 with influenza, the temperature may be lower, for example 99°F.

## How Serious is Influenza?

Certain groups are at risk to develop serious complications, such as pneumonia, that may even result in death. These groups include:

- children less than two years old and seniors, as they have weaker immune systems.
- people with immune systems that are weakened either by disease or medication/treatment.
- people with certain chronic illnesses, such as heart or lung disease.



# How to Protect Yourself and Others Against Influenza

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## Choose to Immunize

**BECAUSE THE** influenza virus is always changing, a new vaccine is created each year containing the three virus strains considered the most likely to circulate. This means you need to be immunized every year. The best time to be immunized is during October and the first half of November – just before the influenza season starts, because it takes two weeks for the vaccine to become effective. Even after influenza arrives in the community, it is not too late to get immunized.

The vaccine cannot cause influenza because the virus in the vaccine is killed. The vaccine is 70 - 90% effective in young, healthy people and protection lasts about six months. The vaccine is less effective for people with weakened immune systems, but if they are immunized, the illness will be less severe if they do become infected.

Since vaccine strains are selected six to nine months before the start of influenza season, there is a chance the circulating strain may change before the season actually starts. The vaccine will NOT protect against other respiratory illnesses.



## Who Should be Immunized?

- People who are at greatest risk of serious complications.
- People such as caregivers, volunteers, and health-care workers who might transmit the disease to persons who are at risk.

Some employers offer vaccine to their staff. Everyone is encouraged to take advantage of flu vaccination.

## Who Should Not be Immunized?

- People who are severely allergic to eggs, because eggs are used to make vaccine.
- People who have severe allergies to any part of the vaccine.
- People who have had a severe reaction to a previous influenza vaccine.
- Children under six months of age.
- People who are ill with fever (they can be immunized after symptoms improve).

# How to Protect Yourself and Others Against Influenza

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## Wash Your Hands!

Next to immunization, the single most important way to prevent influenza is frequent hand washing.

### Wash Them Before:

- handling or eating food or feeding others.
- brushing or flossing teeth.
- inserting or removing contact lenses.
- and after treating wounds or cuts.

### Wash Them After:

- having any contact with a person who has influenza or their immediate environment.
- going to the toilet or changing a diaper.
- blowing your nose or wiping a child's nose.
- coughing or sneezing.
- handling garbage.
- children should wash their hands after playing with toys shared with other children.

## How to wash hands

- Use regular soap. Antibacterial soap is not necessary. Alcohol hand rubs are also effective.
- Rub hands vigorously together for at least 15 seconds, covering all surfaces.
- Rinse under running water.
- Dry with a clean or disposable towel.
- If using a public restroom, use a disposable towel to turn off the faucet to avoid further contact with the tap.

## Cover Your Cough

- Throw away tissues after wiping your nose.,
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow.
- Wash hands after coughing, sneezing, or using tissues.
- Keep your fingers away from your eyes, nose, and mouth.



## Other Ways to Prevent the Spread of Influenza

- Avoid crowds during influenza season.
- Visit those who have influenza only if necessary, and stand more than three feet away from them.
- Keep everyone's personal items separate if a household member has influenza. Avoid sharing computers, pens, papers, clothes, towels, sheets, blankets, food, or eating utensils.
- Disinfect door knobs, switches, handles, toys, and other surfaces that are commonly touched around the home or workplace.
- Here is a disinfectant you can make at home.

### Disinfectant

1 gallon water

1/4 cup bleach

Mix up a fresh batch every time you use it.

- It is okay to wash everyone's dishes and clothes together. Use detergent and very hot water. Wash your hands after handling dirty laundry.
- Wear disposable gloves when in contact with or cleaning up bodily fluids.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Keep children home from school or daycare when they are sick.

# How to Protect Yourself and Others Against Influenza

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## Healthy Habits

- Drink plenty of water.
- Don't smoke.
- Exercise regularly.
- Take a multivitamin daily, if you are an older adult.
- Decrease stress and stay optimistic.

## Prevent Dehydration

If your loved one has diarrhea or vomiting, give fluids that contain electrolytes such as Gatorade® or Pedialyte®. These are available at your pharmacy or grocery store. Or you can make your own rehydration electrolyte drink for someone over the age of 12.

### Electrolyte Drink:

1 quart water

1/2 tsp. baking soda

1/2 tsp. table salt

3 - 4 tbsp. sugar

1/4 tsp. salt substitute (e.g., "No Salt")

Mix well and flavor with lemon juice or sugar-free Kool-Aid®.

## Be Prepared

Everyone should plan ahead in case they become ill with influenza. This is especially important if you live alone, are a single parent, or a caregiver.

- Have enough fluids and other supplies, such as tissues, on hand to last one to two weeks.
- Have medication for fever and a thermometer handy.
- Have a backup caregiver for loved ones.

Prepare for a pandemic with these caregiving supplies:

- Thermometer
- Soap
- Box of disposable gloves
- Acetaminophen
- Ibuprofen
- Bleach
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Paper towels
- Tissues
- Surgical masks (one for each person)
- Sugar, baking soda, salt, salt substitute



# Managing Influenza in Adults

## General Self-Care Measures

- Rest.
- Avoid or limit contact with others while contagious (5 days from the start of symptoms) if possible.
- Drink extra fluids.
- Gargle with warm salt water.
- Use throat lozenges, saline nose drops, a humidifier.
- Don't smoke. Avoid second-hand smoke.
- Talk to others about concerns and ask for help if needed. Keeping in touch by phone or email can help with feelings of aloneness when sick.
- Talk to your pharmacist or health-care provider about what product to use, dosage, possible side effects, and conditions when you should not use the remedy.
- Treat symptoms with over-the-counter (non-prescription) medication with careful attention to the following guidelines.

## General Guidelines for Over-the-Counter Medications (OTCs)

- To prevent adverse reactions or taking extra medication that will have little or no effect, use an OTC remedy that treats only one symptom and/or has only one active ingredient.
- If you are taking more than one medication at a time, check the labels to avoid taking the same ingredient twice.
- Try "regular strength" products before "extra strength."
- Follow instructions on the label. Note possible side effects or drug/health conditions when the medication should not be used.
- Check the expiration date on medications in your home. Take outdated medications to a pharmacy for disposal.
- Keep all medications out of reach of children.



# Managing Influenza in Adults

## Over the Counter Options:

- Muscle pain and fever - Use acetaminophen (the best choice for older adults), for example Tylenol®. If you take acetaminophen for a long time or in high doses, it can affect the liver and kidneys. Or, use Ibuprofen, for example Advil® or Motrin®. Ibuprofen can irritate the stomach.
- Cough - Try a medication with Dextromethorphan (DM) for a dry cough that prevents you from sleeping or causes chest discomfort. Delsym® contains DM (without other ingredients).
- Stuffy nose - Use a decongestant. Nose drops or sprays act quickly and have fewer side effects than medications you take by mouth but should only be used for two – three days to avoid rebound congestion. If stuffy nose continues, consider an oral medication such as pseudoephedrine. Decongestants may cause dry mouth, sleep problems, rapid heartbeat, or other side effects. People who have long-term health problems or who are on other medications should not take decongestants without talking to a health-care provider.
- Sore throat - Try lozenges or throat sprays. Products containing honey, herbs, or pectin soothe the throat.



## When to Seek Medical Care

Adults with influenza should seek medical care if they have heart or lung disease or any other chronic condition that requires regular medical attention. They should also seek care if they are frail, or if they are on treatments that suppress the immune system.

See a physician immediately if you, or a person in your care, have any one of the following symptoms:

- shortness of breath while resting or doing very little.
- difficult or painful breathing.
- coughing up bloody sputum.
- wheezing.
- chest pain.
- fever for three to four days without improvement.
- feeling better, then suddenly having a high fever or becoming ill again.
- extreme drowsiness and difficulty awakening.
- disorientation or confusion.
- sudden inability to function in a normally independent elderly person.
- constant vomiting, especially in an elderly person or a child.

## Prescription Medications

Antibiotics are not normally prescribed for influenza, but your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic for complications such as pneumonia. Antiviral medications can decrease the length and severity of the illness. However, antivirals must be started within 48 hours after the first symptoms appear in order to be effective.

# Managing Influenza in Children

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## Symptoms to Look for in Children:

**INFLUENZA IS** more severe in children under five years, especially between the ages of six and 12 months. Children with influenza may have the same symptoms as adults, but there are some differences in babies and toddlers.

For example:

- A fever can be the only symptom of influenza in babies.
- Seizures, or other central nervous system symptoms, may appear in some infants.
- Children may also have headache, vomiting, irritability, and sensitive eyes.
- Young children usually have higher temperatures, often over 103.1°F.
- About half of children three years old or younger have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach pain.
- Influenza viruses can cause croup, pneumonia, or bronchitis in young children.
- Ear infections and red, sore eyes are more frequent in young children. Sore muscles are also common.

*Note: Very young children and infants do not know how to tell people they have sore muscles or a headache. They may be irritable and eat poorly. They sometimes have a hoarse cry and barking cough.*

Children over five years old and adolescents typically have the same symptoms as adults.

## How to Care for a Child With Influenza

- Take the child's temperature first. Acetaminophen (for example Tylenol®) can be used for fever and muscle pain. Follow age-based instructions exactly, as failure to do so may cause a dangerous overdose. Ibuprofen (for example Motrin®) is another option, but it should not be used for infants less than six months old.
- Children under 18 should NOT take acetylsalicylic acid (ASA), for example Aspirin, or any products containing ASA. Combined with influenza, ASA can cause Reye's syndrome, a very serious condition affecting the nervous system and liver.
- Offer water or juice often while the child is awake.
- Additionally, if breastfeeding, provide the child with breast milk often while awake.
- Encourage the child to rest or involve them in quiet activities for approximately five days.
- Try saline nose drops for stuffy nose or cough.
- Use a humidifier, except with asthmatic children.
- Elevate the head of the bed; infants may be more comfortable in a car seat or baby swing.
- Treat other symptoms with OTC medications if appropriate:
  - Use a cough suppressant (DM) for a dry cough in children over two years old only if it is interrupting your child's sleep. Do not use DM for asthmatics or to treat a moist cough.
  - Try decongestant sprays in children over six months old; oral decongestants with older children if needed.



# Managing Influenza in Children

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## How to Care for a Child with Influenza (cont.)

- Use throat lozenges or warm salt water gargles for children over six years old if needed.
- Talk to your pharmacist or healthcare provider about what product to use, dosage, possible side effects, and conditions when you should not use the remedy.
- Clean your humidifier every day to prevent mold blowing in the air. Use hot water with one part bleach to 10 parts water. Scrub the inside with a cloth or “bottle brush” to get into tight corners. Rinse well with hot water.



## When to Seek Medical Care for a Child

Almost all children with influenza have fever, so whether or not a child has a fever is not helpful as a sign of how severe their illness is.

Seek medical care if a child has influenza and any one of the following conditions:

- is less than three months old.
- has heart or lung disease or any chronic illness requiring regular medical care.
- has a disease or treatments that weaken the immune system.
- takes ASA regularly for a medical condition.
- has a change in breathing (such as breathing fast) or difficulty breathing.
- is very listless and loses interest in playing, watching TV, eating, or drinking.
- is very irritable and cries a lot.
- urinates less than usual, for example less often than every six hours while awake; or has a dry diaper for more than three hours if younger than six months, or longer than six hours if six to 23 months old.
- looks very ill and the caregiver is worried.

# Managing Influenza in Children

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## When to Take a Child to the Emergency Room

Go to a hospital emergency room right away if the child:

- has severe trouble breathing and it is not caused by a stuffy nose.
- has blue lips or hands, suddenly becomes pale, or has cold legs up to their knees.
- is droopy or unable to move.
- is so sleepy they don't respond when you try to get them up.
- shows signs of pain, such as headache or stiff neck, especially if they also have fever, are listless, and their eyes are sensitive to light.
- seems confused.
- has a seizure.

## For More Information

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[www.sdhdidaho.org](http://www.sdhdidaho.org)

[www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)



