

Flu Information — The Flu: A Guide for Parents

What is the flu?

Influenza (the flu) is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by influenza viruses that are constantly changing. Flu causes illness, hospital stays and deaths in the United States each year. Flu can be very dangerous for children. Each year about 20,000 children younger than 5 years old are hospitalized from flu complications, like pneumonia.

How serious is the flu?

Flu illness can vary from mild to severe. Flu can be especially dangerous for young children and children of any age who have certain long term health conditions, including asthma (even mild or controlled), neurological conditions, chronic lung disease, heart disease, blood disorders, endocrine disorders (such as diabetes), and weakened immune systems due to disease or medication. Children with these conditions, and those receiving long-term aspirin therapy, can have more severe illness from the flu.

How does the flu spread?

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with the flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might get the flu by touching something that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or nose.

What are the symptoms of flu?

Symptoms of flu can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, head-ache, chills, fatigue and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea. Some people with flu will not have a fever.

How long can a sick person spread the flu?

People with the flu may infect others from 1 day before getting sick to 5-7 days after. Children and people with weakened immune systems can shed virus for longer, and might still be contagious past 7 days, especially if they still have symptoms.

Can my child go to school, daycare or camp if he or she is sick?

No. Your child should stay home to rest and to avoid giving the flu to other children or to caregivers.

When can my child go back to school after having the flu?

Keep your child home until at least 24 hours after their fever is gone, without using fever-reducing medications, like acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil). A fever is defined as 100.4°F (38°C) or higher.

How can I protect my child against flu?

The first and most important thing to do is to get flu vaccine for your child, yourself, and everyone else in your household every year. Get the vaccine as soon as it is available.

- Vaccination is recommended for everyone 6 months and older.
- It's especially important that young children and children with certain health conditions (see at left) get vaccinated.
- It's very important for parents, grandparents, teachers and caregivers to get vaccinated.
- Everyone caring for infants under 6 months (who are too young to be vaccinated) should be vaccinated if possible. Vaccinating pregnant women can offer some protection to the baby during pregnancy and after birth.

What else can I do to protect my child?

Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Throw the tissue in the trash after use.

- Stay away from people who are sick.
- Wash hands often with soap and water.
- Use an alcohol-based hand rub if soap and water are not available.
- Contact your healthcare provider if your child gets sick, especially if the child is very young (under 5) or has long-term health conditions.
- Seek emergency care if your child has trouble breathing, fast breathing, turns bluish or gray, has severe or persistent vomiting, has trouble waking up, or doesn't interact normally. Much more information is available at:
- www.flu.gov
- www.cdc.gov/flu
- www.immunize.org

Adapted from CDC and developed as per legal requirements pursuant to An Act Relative to Annual Immunization Against Influenza for –Children, MGL Chapter 111, Section 229, Amended 2012. Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2013