

Influenza



What Is It?

Influenza, also called “flu,” is a respiratory illness that is caused by infection with a virus. It is the most frequent cause of death from a vaccine-preventable disease in this country. Young children, especially those under age 2, are at high risk for hospitalization, and other complications, if they get influenza.

What Are the Symptoms?

Initial symptoms include a sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, dry cough, muscle aches, and general malaise. Later symptoms include sore throat, runny nose, productive cough and conjunctivitis (pinkeye). In infants, influenza can sometimes develop into croup, bronchitis, bronchiolitis, or pneumonia requiring hospitalization. Most people improve after the first few days, with reduced fever and headache, but fatigue and cough can last for two weeks or more.

Who Gets It and How?

Influenza is highly contagious. It is spread from person to person by contact with respiratory droplets or nasal secretions. People are most infectious in the 24-hour period prior to the onset of symptoms. Influenza virus can also be contracted from household surfaces (toys, doorknobs, tissues) if there has been recent contamination with the respiratory secretions of an infected person.

When Should People with this Illness Be Excluded?

Children or staff with influenza will initially feel too unwell to attend. Once the fever is gone and a person feels better, there is no reason to stay away from child care. During an outbreak of influenza in a child care setting, most children and staff will be exposed before there is any occurrence of symptoms. Thus, there is no need to exclude children who have persistent respiratory symptoms, but are otherwise feeling well.

Is Influenza a Problem for Pregnant Women?

Women who are pregnant and become infected with influenza have higher rates of influenza-related complications and hospitalizations. They should be vaccinated.

How Can I Limit the Spread of Influenza?

Influenza is vaccine-preventable. Flu shots protect you from the flu for only a year or less, and the viruses that cause the flu also change from year to year, so you need to

get a flu shot every year. The best time to get a flu shot is during October through November, before the flu season starts. It takes 1-2 weeks to develop your immunity after you get a flu shot. Vaccination is recommended for all of the following groups:

- Infants and children between 6 months and 18 years of age;
- Any adult older than 50;
- Adults who work in child care settings;
- Adults and children older than 5 with chronic health conditions like asthma, heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, HIV/AIDS;
- All household contacts (ages 6 months and older) of persons with “high-risk” conditions, including contacts of infants 0–5 months and persons ages 65 years and older;
- Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season (typically November through March). Vaccination can occur in any trimester.

Any other person wishing to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza may also be vaccinated, depending on vaccine availability.

Two doses should be administered to children less than 9 years of age (i.e., 6 months through 8 years) the FIRST year they receive the flu vaccine. The doses should be given at least 6 weeks apart. If a child receives only one dose the first year, then she should receive two doses the second year. After the first year, a single dose should be given in the following years. This means that children who are getting the flu vaccine for the first time should have their first dose in September in order to get two doses in before flu season starts, providing the vaccine is available.

These additional strategies can help prevent or reduce the spread of influenza and other communicable diseases in the child care setting:

- Make sure that all children and staff use good hand washing practices.
- Teach children to cough into their elbow and away from people.
- Wipe noses with clean disposable tissues, dispose of them properly and wash your hands.
- Don’t share food, bottles, toothbrushes or toys that can be put in the mouth.
- Play outdoors often. Let fresh air into your program daily.