

THE 'FLU', HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY

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The full name of the 'flu' is 'Influenza'. It is a disease caused by the influenza virus, and it spreads from person to person. In other words, it is a contagious disease. Influenza affects the respiratory tract from the nose to the lungs. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each year 36,000 Americans die from Influenza and more than 200,000 have to be admitted to hospitals due to Influenza.

Influenza spreads by droplets of secretions from persons who carry the virus, for example via a sneeze (which can carry droplets for up to or even more than 3 feet through the air) or a cough or even while speaking. Persons who show the symptoms of the 'flu' are contagious, but even those who do not yet show the symptoms can spread the virus too. Persons can spread Influenza from one day before the commencement of symptoms and throughout the course of the illness while they show symptoms. If a person is exposed to the virus, symptoms may start as quickly as one day or as late as four days after exposure to the virus, this is called the 'incubation period' of influenza.

Influenza is a seasonal disease. The flu season usually ranges from November through March each year; rarely the flu season can begin earlier and end later. Most cases (heaviest activity of influenza) occur in December through February.

Each year, millions of people throughout the world and in the United States fall ill with the flu. Most people will recover within one to two weeks, but some people such as those whose age is 65 years and older, who have diseases such as diabetes, chronic lung disease, HIV, those on steroids, patients whose immunity is low due to medication use, very young children, pregnant women, people who live in residential living communities are more likely to get complications from the flu. Complications can be serious such as pneumonia, bronchitis and ear infections. Death may occur in some cases.

Symptoms of the flu are similar to a 'cold' but are much more severe and come on suddenly. Symptoms are fever, chills, runny nose, cough, sore throat, headaches, muscle and body aches. If complications occur, such as pneumonia; additional symptoms of the complication will be seen.

You can prevent yourself and your family from getting Influenza. The best way is to get vaccinated against the flu. The vaccine is available as an injection and as a nasal spray. The injection gives more protection, however; for healthy people at very low risk of getting Influenza, the spray form can be used. The nasal spray is not recommended for use in the general population.

Pregnant women should take the vaccine because their immunity is lower because of the pregnancy and because high fever can cause complications such as preterm labor and birth or affect fetal well being inside the uterus. The vaccine will not harm the unborn baby in the mother's womb. All children from 6-23 months should also get the vaccine, so should older people over 50 years of age, people with chronic medical conditions, people with lowered immunity from disease or medication, residents of chronic care facilities, health care workers and anyone who wishes to avoid getting the flu.

Other simple but effective measures to prevent the flu are to wash your hands frequently, especially using antiseptic hand scrubs, cover your nose and mouth while coughing or sneezing, do not touch your nose, face and mouth.

If you do get the flu, do not go to work, rest as much as possible, drink plenty of fluids, take medication to relieve symptoms such as fever and body aches. If you smoke, do not smoke and avoid alcohol use.

Please talk to your doctor if you have any questions about Influenza and its prevention and treatment.

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