



INFORMATION ON THE FLU AND THE FLU VACCINE

What is flu? Seasonal flu is a disease of the body's breathing system, including the nose, throat and lungs. Flu is short for "influenza." Seasonal flu is caused by a virus.

What are the symptoms of seasonal flu? The most common symptoms of flu are fever (usually more than 100.4F), cough, and sore throat. They can also include body aches, headache, chills, runny nose and feeling very tired. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. Symptoms last from a few days to up to a week or more.

What is the difference between a cold and the flu? The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness and dry cough are more common and intense with the flu. Colds tend to develop gradually, while the flu tends to start very suddenly. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose.

Who is at risk? Some people are at higher risk of serious health problems when they get the flu. This includes pregnant women, infants, the elderly and people with medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and weakened immune systems.

How does seasonal flu spread? The flu virus is in the wet spray (droplets of saliva and mucous) that comes out of the nose and mouth of someone who coughs or sneezes. If you are close enough to a person with the flu (3 - 6 feet) when they cough or sneeze, you can breathe in the virus and get sick. Flu symptoms start 1 - 4 days (usually 2 days) after a person breathes in the virus. Flu is spread easily from person to person. The virus can also get on things you touch like doorknobs, phones and toys. After you touch these objects, you can catch the virus when you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. Adults with the seasonal flu can spread it from about one day before symptoms appear to about one week after. Children can spread the flu even longer after they get sick. In general, people with flu are most infectious (able to spread influenza) while they have a fever.

How is seasonal flu treated? There are prescription drugs available to treat the seasonal flu, they are Oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and Zanamivir (Relenza). Treatment is for five days for Tamiflu 75 mg twice a day and for Relenza 5-mg inhalation (10 mg) twice a day for five days. For prevention Tamiflu 75 mg once a day for 10 days and for Relenza two 5-mg inhalations once a day for 10 days. Both these drugs are pregnancy category C medication, indicating that no clinical studies have been conducted to assess the safety in pregnant women. However, the available risks and benefits data indicate that pregnant woman with suspected or confirmed influenza should probably receive therapy. Treatment should be initiated as early as possible because studies have shown that treatment initiated early, within 48 hours, is more likely to provide benefit.

People sick with flu should make sure to drink plenty of fluids, get plenty of rest, eat healthy foods, wash their hands frequently and stay home to avoid spreading the flu to other people. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) pain relievers may help people with the flu feel more comfortable, but Ibuprofen should not be taken by pregnant women. Children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin, because a rare but serious disease called Reye syndrome can occur.

If you think you have the flu, should you get tested? There is no need for children and adults with mild flu symptoms to be tested for the flu virus. Testing does not usually affect treatment or medical advice. Most people with the flu who are generally in good health will recover without needing to visit a doctor. People with severe illness or hospital patients may need to be tested for flu.

How should you protect yourself and others from getting or spreading the flu?

- Getting the flu vaccine.
- Washing your hands often with soap and water, or using an alcohol-based hand gel. Also 'hands off face'.
- Coughing or sneezing into a tissue or into the inside of your elbow if you don't have a tissue. Then throw tissues away and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Use a household cleaner to clean things that are touched often, like door knobs, toys, phones and faucets.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick. Try to stay at least 3-6 feet from someone who is sick with the flu.
- People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid large crowds, if possible.
- Natural remedies: Vitamin C 1-3g/day; Selenium 200mcg/day; Vitamin D3 1000IU/day; Probiotics; Oil of Oregano; Ginger; warm salt water or Listerine gargles twice a day;
- Stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin). For most people, this will mean staying at home for about four days.
- If you are sick with the flu and need to go to a doctor's office or hospital wear a facemask.

Vaccine for seasonal flu? There are two types of vaccines for the flu: the flu shot (given with a needle injection, usually in the arm) and the nasal-spray (a spray that is inhaled through the nose). The nasal spray can not be given to pregnant women. Getting the vaccine is thought to be one of the best ways to protect yourself against seasonal flu. Getting flu vaccine will not give you the flu.

Who should get seasonal flu vaccine? In general, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting seasonal flu can get vaccinated. The following groups are particularly vulnerable and may benefit from the vaccine: Children; Pregnant women or parents of children under 6 months of age; People 50 years of age and older; People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and weakened immune systems; People who live in nursing homes and other long term care facilities; Anyone else who might spread flu to someone at increased risk of having serious health problems from flu, for example, health care workers and people who live with or care for anyone on the list above.

Is the Flu Vaccine safe? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): "Influenza vaccination is the most effective method for preventing influenza and influenza-related complications". The CDC feels that flu vaccines are considered safe. If you have an allergy to eggs, or a fever, you should not get the vaccine. According to the CDC, how well the flu vaccine works depends on how close the match is between the flu vaccine and the types of flu viruses that are circulating in the community. In years when the vaccine strains and the virus strains are well-matched, the vaccine can reduce the chances of getting the flu by 70%-90% in healthy adults. It takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection.

Can pregnant women get flu vaccine during their pregnancy? According to the CDC it is safe to give seasonal flu vaccines to pregnant women anytime during pregnancy. Some are concerned that the preservative in some vaccines, thimerosal, which is mercury based, can be harmful. According to the CDC, there is no scientific evidence that thimerosal causes harm. The amount of mercury that is contained in the preservative is within the range that is considered safe by the CDC. In general, it is felt that keeping safe from the flu outweighs the small risk of side effects from vaccines. However, this is a personal decision each person needs to make themselves, weighing the pros and cons of vaccination versus non-vaccination, and understanding that there are uncertainties on both sides of the argument.

Resources:

Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at: www.mass.gov/flu
Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at: www.cdc.gov/flu