



Patient Information

Fighting the Flu

Influenza, commonly called “the flu,” is a contagious disease caused by a virus. It affects the respiratory tract, which is made up of the nose, throat, and lungs. In the United States, “flu season” is said to last from October through April. Every year during this time, 10% to 20% of Americans come down with the flu. Most people recover completely, but about 114,000 are hospitalized for complications from the illness—and nearly one third of these cases result in death. The good news is that there are some effective and easy ways to protect yourself from the flu.

How do I know if I’m at risk?

The viruses that cause the flu are highly contagious, or easily spread from person to person. They travel in tiny droplets that are expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes, laughs, or talks. These droplets can travel up to three feet and land on objects, such as doorknobs or telephones, or even other people. And if the droplets find their way onto your hands, and you then touch your eyes, mouth, or nose before washing them, the virus can enter your body and make you sick.

Anyone can get the flu, but it’s more common in places where many people live or work closely together, such as school dormitories, day care centers, and nursing homes. Exposure to smoke and other pollutants also can increase your risk for flu by injuring your airways and making them

more vulnerable to infection. For certain groups of people—pregnant women; people with such chronic medical conditions as AIDS, asthma, heart disease, or diabetes; and those who are under age two or over age 65—the flu can lead to more serious, even life threatening, complications such as *pneumonia* (new-mow-nyuh) or *bronchitis* (brahn-kite-us).

What are the warning signs?

Symptoms of the flu are similar to—but often much worse than—those of the common cold. They include a high fever (between 102° F and 106° F) that lasts up to five days, chills, flushed face, lack of appetite, headache, body and muscle aches, extreme tiredness or weakness, and dry cough. Less common symptoms include sore throat, sneezing, and runny or stuffy nose. Some people, particularly children, may experience nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. These symptoms usually develop suddenly (a few days after you’re exposed to the virus) and subside within a week—though you may have a lingering cough or feel tired for longer.

When do I need medical attention?

In most people, the flu resolves on its own without medical attention. Although home care usually is sufficient, you may want to visit your doctor when your symptoms begin because if the flu is diagnosed early, certain prescription medications may help. A flu

These pages may be reproduced noncommercially by federal practitioners for their patients.



diagnosis is made after your doctor evaluates your symptoms and performs a physical examination. A swab from your nose or throat may be taken for laboratory testing.

If you belong to one of the high risk populations and you develop any flu symptoms, be sure to visit your doctor right away to help prevent the sometimes life threatening complications associated with the flu. Seek emergency care if you or a family member have the flu and develop such severe symptoms as shortness of breath or rapid breathing; bluish skin tone; chest pain; dizziness or fainting; confusion; coughing that produces thick, yellow-green mucous; or severe vomiting.

How can I avoid the problem?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to receive a flu vaccination at the beginning of each yearly flu season, usually around October. Like any living thing, viruses change over time. That's why you need to be vaccinated every year—last year's flu shot won't work on this year's new flu viruses. The flu vaccine comes in two forms: injection (or "flu shot") and nasal spray (available only for healthy individuals between ages five and 49). It's recommended especially for those at high risk for flu complications and anyone who lives or works closely with such people. But the vaccine isn't 100% effective: There's a small chance that you'll still catch the flu, even after vaccination, because scientists can't always predict exactly how the viruses will change each year.

While not as effective as the vaccine, three types of oral antiviral drugs are also available for flu prevention. These include *amantadine* (uh-mant-uh-deen),

rimantidine (rih-mant-uh-deen), and *oseltamivir* (oh-selt-uh-muh-veer). Usually, these drugs are prescribed to people who live or work in places that are prone to flu outbreaks.

You can take steps to halt the spread of the flu by avoiding people who are sick (and likewise, staying home from work or school when you're sick); covering your mouth and nose with a tissue (not your hand!) when you cough or sneeze; washing your hands frequently; and not touching your eyes, nose, or mouth—this prevents germs on your hands from entering your body.

How is it treated?

Home treatment for the flu includes getting plenty of rest, drinking lots of liquids (water is best, but warm tea or broth can be soothing), and avoiding alcohol and tobacco. Many over-the-counter flu medications are available. Make sure that you follow the directions for use and that the medication's label specifically lists your symptoms. Individuals under the age of 18 who have flulike symptoms should never be given products containing aspirin before consulting a doctor.

If you're diagnosed with the flu within two days of symptom onset, your doctor probably will prescribe one of the same three antiviral drugs that are used to prevent the flu. In addition, an orally inhaled powder called *zanamavir* (zuh-nam-uh-veer) can be used to fight the flu in individuals over the age of seven. While none of these drugs can cure the flu outright, they can ease symptoms and shorten flu duration by about a day. ●