

The Flu (Influenza)



Almost every child gets the flu (influenza) from time to time. What is the flu? How can I prevent the flu from spreading? Who should get the flu vaccine? The following are answers to these and other questions from parents about the flu.

What is the flu?

The flu is caused by a virus. Although there are 3 influenza viruses—types A, B, and C—most flu outbreaks are caused by A or B.

The flu usually occurs from November through April. People can get the flu a number of times during their lifetime because the virus often changes from year to year.

If someone is exposed to the flu, it can be a couple of days before symptoms start. The flu can then last a week or longer. Your child will usually feel the worst during the first few days of the illness.

What are the symptoms?

Flu symptoms include the following:

- A sudden fever (usually over 101°F or 38.3°C)
- Chills
- Lack of energy
- Headaches
- Muscle aches and pain
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Vomiting and belly pain
- Stuffy, runny nose

There are usually no serious complications from the flu. However, sometimes an ear infection, a sinus infection, croup, bronchiolitis, or even pneumonia may develop, especially in infants or in children with a serious health condition, including lung disease, heart disease, a weakened immune system, or cancer. Talk with your child's doctor if your child has pain in the ear, a cough that won't go away, or a fever that lasts more than 3 to 4 days.

How is the flu spread?

The flu is spread from person to person through

- Direct contact with virus droplets passed through the air from coughing and sneezing
- Indirect contact, such as hand-to-hand touching or when your child touches a contaminated surface like a toy or doorknob and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth

The flu spreads very easily, especially to other family members, preschool and school-aged children, and all adults who spend time with children. The virus usually spreads during the first several days of the illness, although young children can be infectious before symptoms begin and for as many as 10 days afterward.

A Warning About Aspirin

Do not give aspirin to any child or teen with a fever. The use of aspirin has been associated with a rare but very serious illness called Reye syndrome that can affect the liver and brain.

How is the flu treated?

In children at least 1 year of age, influenza may be treated to speed recovery with antiviral drugs if taken within the first 48 hours after symptoms begin. Antiviral drugs have shown the most benefit when given as soon as symptoms begin. In some cases, antiviral drugs can be taken before exposure to the flu to prevent illness or to help lower its severity. This is particularly important for children with serious health problems who haven't had a flu vaccine that year. (See "Who should get the flu vaccine?")

Extra rest and lots of fluids to prevent dehydration can help your child feel better. If your child is uncomfortable because of fever, acetaminophen may help your child feel better. Check first with your child's doctor before giving your child any other medicines, including over-the-counter cold and cough medicines. Antibiotics can be used to fight bacterial infections but have no effect on viruses, like influenza.

How can I prevent the flu from spreading?

People with the flu are most infectious during the 24-hour period before symptoms appear and also on the days when the symptoms are at their worst.

Good hygiene and regular housecleaning are the best ways to prevent the flu from spreading. The following are more ways to help prevent the spread of the flu:

- Teach your children to always cover their mouths and noses when they cough or sneeze and how to use a tissue.
- Use tissues for wiping runny noses and to catch sneezes. Throw them in the trash after each use. Wear a mask if you are coughing or sneezing frequently.
- Avoid kissing your child on or around the mouth or face.
- Make sure everyone washes their hands before and after coming into close contact with someone with the flu. Everyone should wash their hands with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds (about as long as one verse of "Happy Birthday"). You may also use a waterless hand cleaner in addition to hand washing or if soap and water are not available.
- Don't let children share pacifiers, cups, spoons, forks, washcloths, or towels. Never share toothbrushes.
- Use paper cups in the bathroom and kitchen. Throw them in the trash after each use.
- Wash dishes, forks, and spoons in hot, soapy water or the dishwasher.
- Change cloth towels often and wash them in hot water.
- Wipe all surfaces, including toys, with a disinfectant or soap and hot water. Viruses can live for more than 30 minutes on doorknobs, toilet handles, countertops, and even toys.

- Keep children, particularly infants, away from secondhand tobacco smoke. Don't smoke around your children. Children who are exposed to tobacco smoke cough, wheeze more, and have a harder time getting over the flu.

What types of flu vaccines are available?

There are safe and effective vaccines to protect against the flu. The 2 types of influenza vaccine used to immunize both children and adults are inactivated influenza vaccine and live, attenuated influenza vaccine (also called LAIV). Inactivated influenza vaccine is given by injection and LAIV is sprayed into the nose (nasal spray).

Who should get the flu vaccine?

Inactivated influenza vaccine is recommended for the following:

- All children 6 months of age or older with serious health problems, such as lung disease, heart disease, a weakened immune system, or cancer
- All healthy children aged 6 through 59 months
- Household contacts and out-of-home caregivers of all children with high-risk conditions and of all healthy children younger than 5 years
- All health care professionals

For children younger than 9 years who have never before been vaccinated, 2 doses of vaccine, given at least 1 month apart, are required to provide adequate protection against the flu. After that, only 1 dose of vaccine is needed each year. Children younger than 9 years who were immunized for the first time last flu season, but only received 1 dose of vaccine, will need 2 doses this flu season.

LAIV is currently approved only for healthy children aged 2 through 17 years and healthy adults aged 18 through 49 years. It should not be given to any child who has asthma or recurrent wheezing.

The best time to get the flu vaccine is before the flu season starts, beginning early in the fall. Find out from your child's doctor when the vaccine is available in your area. Because the flu season often lasts well into March and beyond, the flu vaccine is recommended through late winter to early spring.

Who should not get the flu vaccine?

Both types of flu vaccine should not be given to anyone with known allergic reactions (like hives, angioedema, asthma, and anaphylaxis) to chicken or egg proteins, or any other parts of the flu vaccines. This is because eggs are used to make them. Your child's doctor may recommend skin testing before giving the vaccine to any child who may have had an allergic reaction to eggs in the past.

Are there any side effects?

There are generally few side effects. The area where the shot was given may be sore, and a child may get a mild fever.

Inactivated influenza vaccine is given by injection and contains an inactivated or killed virus. This means your child cannot catch the flu from it. However, LAIV contains a live, weakened flu virus that is sprayed into the nose and has the potential to produce mild signs or symptoms related to influenza virus infection.

Is it the flu or a cold?

The flu and the common cold are respiratory infections caused by different viruses. They can be hard to tell apart because the flu can look like the common cold with only nose and throat symptoms or can be more serious, involving the lungs and other areas of the body.

Even though they share many of the same symptoms, there are differences. A child with a common cold usually has less of a fever and only mild coughing. Children with the flu usually feel much more sick, achy, and miserable. Also, the flu tends to strike more quickly than a cold. Stomach upsets and vomiting are more common with the flu than with a cold. Children who have colds usually have enough energy to play and keep up with their normal day-to-day routines. The flu, on the other hand, may keep most children in bed for several days.

When should I call the doctor?

If your child is younger than 2 months and has a fever, call your child's doctor right away. For a child older than 2 months who has been exposed to the flu or shows signs of the flu, call your child's doctor within 48 hours. Also, call your child's doctor if your child experiences any of the following:

- Trouble breathing
- Blue lips or nails
- A cough that will not go away after 1 week
- Pain in the ear
- Fever that continues or comes back after 3 to 4 days
- Does not start to feel better after a few days

This publication has been developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The authors and contributors are expert authorities in the field of pediatrics. No commercial involvement of any kind has been solicited or accepted in the development of the content of this publication.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's doctor. There may be variations in treatment that your child's doctor may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

