

Frequently Asked Questions About Seasonal Flu

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Flu, a contagious respiratory illness, is caused by influenza viruses. In some cases, the seasonal flu virus can cause severe illness and/or complications, although the majority of people recover fully without medical treatment. The best way to decrease the risk of flu and its complications is to get the flu vaccine annually. Almost half of all adult Americans receive a flu vaccine each year. In Tennessee, influenza/pneumonia is the ninth leading cause of death, which means it's very important to prevent the spread of flu.

About Flu

What is influenza (flu)?

Flu is a contagious respiratory disease affecting the nose, throat and lungs. The two main types of human flu viruses are flu A and flu B. The flu A virus is the most common type of flu virus, typically causes most cases of flu early in the flu season, and generally causes more severe symptoms than flu B.

When is flu season?

Flu infection rates are highest from October-May, with peaks between December-February. However, flu can still be contracted during the spring and summer months.

Who is at risk for becoming infected with flu?

Anyone can get infected with flu, but the people who are at higher risk of flu complications include children younger than 5 years old, adults 65 and over, adults with chronic conditions, pregnant women, people with disabilities, people with HIV/AIDS, or people who have cancer.

What are the symptoms of flu?

Flu can cause mild to severe illness and, at times, can lead to death. Flu symptoms usually come on abruptly. People who have flu often have some of the following symptoms: fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny or congested nose, body aches, headaches, fatigue, and, sometimes, vomiting and diarrhea (Figure 1). Not everyone who has flu will have a fever.

How does flu spread?

People with flu can spread it to others within a six-foot radius, as they expel infected droplets when they cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can be inhaled by another person, thereby spreading the virus. Flu can also be spread when a person comes in contact with an object or surface that has flu virus on it and then touches their own mouth, nose or eyes.

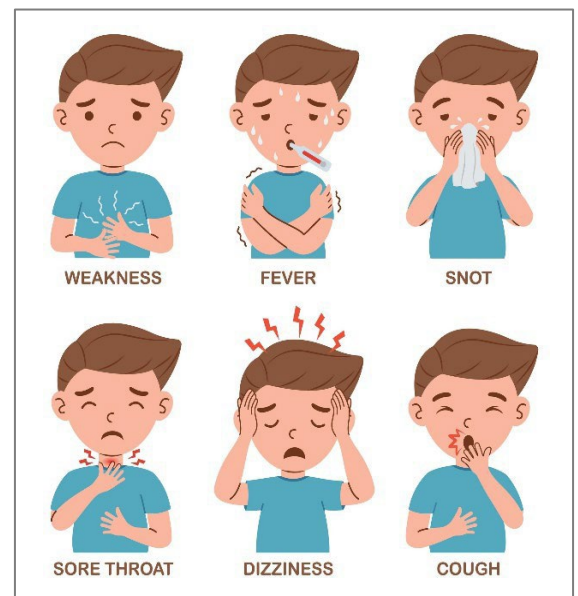


Figure 1. Common symptoms of seasonal flu.

When is a person with flu most contagious?

People with flu are most contagious in the first three to four days after symptoms appear. Most adults can infect others one day before symptoms develop and up to five to seven days after becoming ill. Symptoms generally begin two days after the virus enters the body, meaning that it is possible to spread the flu before illness is apparent.

How does flu differ from the common cold?

While the common cold and the flu share many symptoms, the common cold is usually much milder than the flu. Table 1 shows the differences between the two illnesses.

Table 1. Cold versus flu symptoms, from the CDC (2022)

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS	COLD	FLU
Symptom onset	Gradual	Abrupt
Fever	Rare	Usual
Aches	Slight	Usual
Chills	Uncommon	Fairly Common
Fatigue, weakness	Sometimes	Usual
Sneezing	Common	Sometimes
Chest discomfort, cough	Mild to moderate	Common
Stuffy nose	Common	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Headache	Rare	Common

How does flu differ from COVID-19?

Flu and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses. COVID-19 is more likely to result in serious illness in some populations, and people with this illness are contagious for a longer period of time. Because of the similar symptoms in the two illnesses, testing is necessary to confirm diagnosis. Moreover, it is possible to have the flu and COVID-19 at the same time, increasing the risk for serious illness.

Can someone die from the flu?

Flu negatively impacts many aspects of life, including a risk of severe illness or death. It is estimated that in the United States flu was associated with 52,000 deaths during the 2017-2018 influenza season and 34,000 deaths during the 2018-2019 influenza season.

Flu Prevention

What are some ways to prevent the flu?

There are some healthy lifestyle choices that can strengthen the immune system and help in the prevention of flu.



- Follow a healthy diet that includes at least 1.5 cups of fruit and 2 cups of vegetables each day.
- Get regular physical activity, with a goal of 30 minutes per day of moderate intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking or gardening).
- Get adequate sleep. Adults need at least seven hours per night for maximal health.
- Drink water and stay hydrated. Try to limit or avoid sugary or caffeinated beverages.
- Wash hands often with soap and water.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. Those who are sick should limit contact with other people to avoid spreading illness.
- Get a flu vaccine

Flu Diagnosis and Treatment

How is the flu diagnosed?

Anyone experiencing flu-like symptoms can visit their primary care provider to determine whether they should be tested for flu. There are multiple tests that can detect flu as well as other respiratory viruses. The most common diagnostic flu test is the rapid influenza diagnostic test, which detects the flu antigens that might be stimulating an immune response. Results are available in only 15-20 minutes. However, this test has a lower accuracy level than some of the other testing options. The test can also identify multiple types of respiratory viruses in a laboratory setting. While it takes longer to receive the results of the test, these results are more accurate than the rapid test.



What treatment options exist for a person with the flu?

- Most people with the flu experience mild illness and do not require medical care or antiviral medication. In most cases, people with flu are able to stay home and treat the symptoms with over-the-counter medication or therapies.
- Fever can typically be treated with a fever-reduction medication such as Tylenol or Motrin.
- There are over-the-counter medicines that can treat other flu symptoms, such as congestion or cough. People with the flu should speak with their primary care provider if they have questions about medications that would work best for them.
- Eating fruits and vegetables, drinking plenty of water, getting adequate sleep, and performing light physical activity are ways to strengthen the immune system and help the body heal.
- Table 2 from the CDC shows critical warning signs of flu complications. Anyone experiencing any of these symptoms should seek medical care immediately.
- Those in a high-risk population who are experiencing flu symptoms should contact their primary care provider to discuss the best course of action. Antibiotics cannot treat flu, because flu is a virus. Flu antiviral medication, such as Tamiflu, can render flu illness milder and shorten the length of illness. In most cases, these medications should be started within two days of becoming sick. Those with flu symptoms can schedule an appointment with their primary care provider to determine if antiviral medication is a good option for them.

Table 2. Emergency warning signs of flu complications, from the CDC. (2022)
People experiencing any of these warning signs should obtain medical care right away.

In children	In adults
Fast breathing or trouble breathing	Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
Bluish lips or face	Persistent pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
Ribs pulling in with each breath	Persistent dizziness, confusion, inability to arouse
Chest pain	Seizures
Severe muscle pain (child refuses to walk)	Not urinating
Dehydration (no urine for 8 hours, dry mouth, no tears when crying)	Severe muscle pain
Not alert or interacting when awake	Severe weakness or unsteadiness
Seizures	Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
Fever above 104 degrees F	Worsening of chronic medical conditions
In children less than 12 weeks, any fever	
Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen	
Worsening of chronic medical conditions	

These lists are not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptoms that are severe or concerning.

What are the safe ways to care for someone who has the flu?

- Avoid spending time face-to-face with the person who is sick.
- Wash hands frequently, using soap and water.
- Disinfect common surfaces.
- Be sure to wash hands after handling laundry, dishes or tissues that the sick person has used.

Flu Vaccine

Who should get the flu vaccine?

Anyone six months of age or older should get an annual flu vaccine, with rare exception. Vaccination is especially important for people who are at high risk for serious complications from the flu.

Are flu vaccines safe?

Historically, flu vaccines are very safe. Hundreds of millions of Americans have safely received the flu vaccine over the past 50 years, and continual research supports the safety of flu vaccines.

Are there different types of flu vaccines?

There are several types of flu vaccines available, with the most common being the standard-dose flu shot. Speak with your primary care provider to determine the vaccine that is best for you.



How effective are flu vaccines?

Flu vaccines prevent millions of illnesses and doctor visits related to flu each year. While it is possible for vaccinated individuals to get the flu, its severity will be lessened. During the last flu season before the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2019-2020, flu vaccination prevented approximately 7.5 million flu illnesses, 3.7 million flu-related medical visits, 105,000 hospitalizations associated with flu, and 6,300 deaths related to flu. During other flu seasons, the vaccine has lessened the need to seek medical care by as much as 40-60 percent.

Can the flu vaccine result in a case of the flu?

No, the flu vaccine cannot cause the flu, as it contains *inactivated* virus. Although the nasal spray flu vaccine does contain a live virus, it will not cause the flu.

What are the side effects of the flu vaccine?

Flu vaccines occasionally cause side effects, which are typically mild and go away on their own within a few days after vaccination. Side effects may include soreness, redness and/or swelling at the injection site, low-grade headache, fever, nausea, muscle aches, and fatigue. Some people may faint when they are receiving the flu injection, but this is rare.

What are the benefits of getting a flu vaccine?

- Helps prevent the spread of flu.
- Reduces the severity of illness if you do get sick with flu.
- Decreases the rate of flu-associated hospitalization.
- Helps prevent flu in pregnant women during and after pregnancy and can protect infants from flu in their first few months of life.
- Protects those around you, including infants too young to receive the flu vaccine or people who have chronic health conditions.

Where are flu vaccines available?

Flu vaccines are widely available, typically starting in September each year at primary care offices, local health departments, and/or pharmacies. The Tennessee Department of Health website is a good resource for vaccine sites.

Additional Resources

CDC flu vaccine information: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/flu/index.html>

CDC general flu information: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/flu-faq.htm>

CDC weekly flu season updates: <https://gis.cdc.gov/grasp/fluview/main.html>

Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/flu/symptoms-causes/syc-20351719>

Tennessee Department of Health: <https://www.tn.gov/health/cedep/immunization-program/ip/flu-in-tennessee.html>

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