

# Spotlight on Health

## Seasonal Influenza (Flu)

You feel miserable when you have a common cold—a runny and/or blocked nose, sore throat, cough. But you know that with rest, cold medications, and maybe some good chicken soup you are going to feel better in a week or so. The flu, on the other hand, can be a much more serious illness, especially for older people, young children, and those with certain chronic medical conditions. People with the flu may require more than bedrest and over-the-counter cold medications to prevent serious problems.

This newsletter discusses similarities and differences between the common cold and the flu, how you can lessen your chances of getting the flu, and treatments your healthcare provider may consider if you catch the flu.

### How the Flu Is Different from the Common Cold

Symptoms of the flu that are somewhat different than those of the common cold are a high temperature (102°F or above), cold sweats and shivering, a bad headache, shortness of breath, aching in your joints and limbs, and feeling like you have no energy at all. Children, more than adults, are likely to have nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.<sup>1</sup> However, it is important to remember that, in general, it can be difficult to tell the difference between a cold and the flu based on symptoms alone.

Both the common cold and flu are caused by viruses. But the flu is caused by specific types of viruses (influenza A and B). You can catch a common cold at any time during the year. The “flu season,” on the other hand, usually runs from October to March but can last until May.<sup>2</sup>

### How to Avoid Getting the Flu

There isn't a sure-fire way to avoid getting the flu. But, the best way to reduce your chances is to get vaccinated each year. You can get the flu vaccine any time during the flu season, but it is best to get it before the flu season begins. Because the flu viruses change each year, you need to get vaccinated each year. Most healthcare providers and pharmacies provide the service. Certain groups of people, like those who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs, should not get the vaccine. Always check with your healthcare provider to find out if there is any reason you should not get vaccinated.

Other things you can do to help avoid getting the flu is stay away from people who are sick and have flu-like symptoms, wash your hands frequently, and avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth—germs often spread when people handle something contaminated and then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth.<sup>1</sup>

### I Think I Have the Flu

If you think you have the flu, call your healthcare provider. This is very important if you are older, or if you have any longstanding medical conditions, especially those that affect your breathing or your heart. Older individuals, young children, and those with certain medical conditions are more likely to get the flu, and can have more serious disease.<sup>3</sup> It is very important that you call your healthcare provider or go to the emergency department if your temperature remains high for more than a few days, you feel seriously ill, or you become short of breath or have chest pain.



### If You Have These Symptoms In Addition to Common Symptoms, You May Have the Flu

- A high temperature (over 102°F)
- Cold sweats and shivering
- A cough
- Muscle aches, especially in your back, arms, and legs
- Loss of appetite
- Extreme fatigue

### The Best Way to Prevent Getting and Spreading the Flu

- Get vaccinated every year in September, or as soon as the vaccine is available
- Take common precautions. These include washing your hands often, avoiding close contact with sick people, and limiting contact with other people when you are sick. For more information, visit the CDC web page on flu prevention: [cdc.gov/flu/protect/preventing.htm](http://cdc.gov/flu/protect/preventing.htm)

## How Your Healthcare Provider Can Help

Your healthcare provider can determine if you have a cold or the flu. Flu symptoms can be treated with prescription anti-flu medications, which are most effective if taken within 3 days of when your symptoms start. Additionally, over-the-counter medications may be helpful, as well as getting plenty of rest and drinking plenty of fluids. But it is important to know if you have the flu or a cold because the flu can become a very serious illness very quickly.

Most people recover from the flu in 1 to 2 weeks. But sometimes the symptoms become very severe. If your temperature remains high, or if you are not keeping down any fluids your healthcare provider may admit you to the hospital for intravenous fluids and other treatments. In certain patients, antiviral medications are sometimes used to shorten the duration of the flu and lessen its severity. It is important to know that antibiotics are not useful for treating the flu.

## How the Laboratory Can Help

Quest Diagnostics offers a test that can tell if you are infected with a flu virus. The test does not require any blood—it is done with a simple swab from your nostril. The test results come back very quickly. This can help your doctor begin any medical treatment sooner, potentially lessening the duration and severity of the flu. The flu test can prevent you from taking antibiotics if you do not need them.

## Additional Information

For more information, visit the Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention website (<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/index.htm>) or these helpful websites:

- The World Health Organization: [who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs211/en/](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs211/en/)
- WebMD: [webmd.com/cold-and-flu/tc/influenza-when-to-call-a-doctor](http://webmd.com/cold-and-flu/tc/influenza-when-to-call-a-doctor)
- Medline Plus: [medlineplus.gov/flu.html](http://medlineplus.gov/flu.html)
- FamilyDoctor.org: [familydoctor.org/condition/colds-and-the-flu/](http://familydoctor.org/condition/colds-and-the-flu/)

## References

1. Influenza (Seasonal). World Health Organization website. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs211/en/>. Updated November 2016. Accessed November 9, 2017.
2. Frequently asked flu questions 2017-2018 influenza season. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/flu-season-2017-2018.htm>. Updated November 7, 2017. Accessed November 9, 2017.
3. Boktor SW, Hafner JW. StatPearls [Internet]: Influenza. Treasure Island, FL: StatPearls Publishing; 2017: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK459363/>. Accessed November 9, 2017.

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