



Influenza

(Flu, Seasonal)

What is influenza?

Influenza or “flu” is a respiratory disease caused by a virus. There are two main types of flu viruses — A and B. Each type includes many related viruses or strains, each slightly different from the others. Type A epidemics are generally more frequent and severe than those of type B, but type B can still cause serious illness. Influenza most commonly occurs during the “influenza season,” which can happen at any time from October to May, but influenza does circulate at low levels year-round.

Who is at risk for influenza?

People of all ages can get the flu.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Flu symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, chills, headache, body aches and malaise (generally feeling unwell). Symptoms usually last about a week. The risk of developing severe complications, such as pneumonia and death, increases with age (especially in people older than 65), and for individuals with chronic medical conditions (such as diabetes; diseases of the heart, lungs or kidneys; severe anemia; or other chronic diseases that weaken the immune system, AIDS or HIV infection), children and pregnant women.

Vomiting and diarrhea are possible but uncommon symptoms of influenza, and are generally accompanied by multiple respiratory symptoms. There is no such thing as the “stomach flu.” An illness characterized primarily by fever, vomiting and diarrhea is more likely a gastrointestinal illness, such as norovirus.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within one to four days after being exposed, with an average of two days.

How is influenza spread?

Flu is spread from person to person when a person with flu coughs, sneezes or talks, spreading the droplets through the air. It is also possible for flu to be transmitted via a contaminated surface, such a doorknob or phone.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

An individual is able to spread the disease up to at least one day before they shows signs and symptoms of illness and for three to five days after symptoms start. Rarely, people (especially children) can shed influenza virus for as long as two weeks.

How is a person diagnosed?

Laboratory tests are available to confirm influenza. However, diagnosis may be based on the appearance of classic signs and symptoms alone, especially when flu is known to be circulating widely.

What is the treatment?

Antibiotics will not work against the flu; however, antiviral drugs are available for the treatment of flu. A health care professional will decide if antivirals are appropriate for each case. Often, treatment of symptoms is recommended, such as bed rest, drinking more than the usual amount of liquids and taking pain relievers to help reduce the discomfort of illness. Children with the flu should not be treated with aspirin. In more severe cases,

antibiotics may be prescribed to prevent secondary bacterial infections that can appear in conjunction with flu when a person's immune system is weakened.

Does past infection make a person immune?

People do build up immunity against the different types of flu, but the immunity can wane over time. Also, because flu viruses change over time, repeated infections can occur despite previous exposures.

Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have influenza?

Yes. People with flu should stay home from school, work and child care until they have been fever free for 24 hours without the aid of fever reducers, and regardless of whether or not they have received antivirals. In clinical tests, antivirals do not reduce the amount of time a person is able to spread the influenza virus. Staying home when ill not only helps in recovery, but also helps reduce the spread of flu to others in child care, school, and work settings.

What can be done to prevent the spread of influenza?

The best way to prevent the spread of flu is to get vaccinated every year. Everyone 6 months and older is recommended to receive the flu vaccine each year; some children between 6 months and 8 years may need two doses.

Additional ways to help reduce the spread of flu are to wash your hands frequently, avoid touching your face with unwashed hands, avoid close contact with those who have not been vaccinated or are ill, cover your coughs and sneezes, throw your tissues in the trash, stay home when you are sick and clean commonly touched surfaces.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndflu.com or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

This disease is a reportable condition. As mandated by North Dakota law, any laboratory-confirmed incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health within seven days.

Resources:

1. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30th ed. [Children in Out-Of-Home Care]. Kimberlin, DW; Brady, MT; Jackson, MA; Long, SS. American Academy of Pediatrics. 2015: 132-151.
2. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30th ed. [Influenza]. Kimberlin, DW; Brady, MT; Jackson, MA; Long, SS. American Academy of Pediatrics. 2015: 476-493.
3. Heymann, D. L. (2015). *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 20th Edition*. Influenza. American Public Health Association. 2015: 306-322.