

What is influenza?

Flu is caused by an infection with the influenza virus. It is much worse than a heavy cold. Symptoms include:

- ❖ Headache
- ❖ High fever and shivers
- ❖ Cough
- ❖ Sore throat
- ❖ Aching muscles and joints

Unlike the 'common cold' it usually starts suddenly. Most people will get better after 2 to 7 days but some people can take weeks to recover fully. It can develop into very serious illnesses, such as pneumonia and bronchitis. In these cases people may need treatment and possibly be admitted to hospital. There is a danger that some people (mainly those in poor health, very young, elderly and people with chronic chest diseases) will die from the flu.

How is influenza spread?

The flu virus is easily passed on by breathing in the tiny droplets from the breath of infected people. It usually takes about two - three days to become ill. An infected person can probably pass on the disease the day before their symptoms appear and remain infectious for 3-5 days.

Why do so many have it now?

The flu virus is constantly making small changes producing new strains. This makes it difficult to control. Flu can rapidly spread and cause an epidemic (more cases than expected) in any one area. A pandemic is an epidemic occurring over a very wide area and usually affecting a large portion of the population. In the 20th century, pandemics occurred in 1918 ('Spanish Flu'), 1957 ('Asian Flu'), 1968 ('Hong Kong Flu'). Pandemics of influenza are started by major changes to the virus. As most people have not had the chance to become immune to these new strains, widespread infection may occur.

Could it have been prevented?

Vaccines are not always available to prevent pandemics. It's a very good idea to get a flu vaccine every year if you fall into any of the groups listed below. People who are severely allergic to eggs shouldn't get flu vaccine.

Flu vaccines are recommended for certain groups such as:

- ❖ People over 65 years
- ❖ Health care workers
- ❖ Children (2-17 phased in over a few years since 2013) and pregnant women

Whatever your age, if you have:

- ❖ a chronic heart or chest complaint
- ❖ chronic kidney disease
- ❖ diabetes
- ❖ lowered immunity to disease
- ❖ Any serious medical condition (check with your doctor)

What can I do to feel better?

There's no cure for a cold or the flu. Antibiotics don't work against viruses. All you can do to feel better is treat your symptoms while your body fights off the virus

Ways to treat your flu symptoms

- ❖ Stay home and rest, especially while you have a fever
- ❖ Stop smoking and avoid smoke from others, which can make symptoms worse
- ❖ Drink plenty of fluids like water, fruit juices and clear soups. Fluids are important if you have a fever because fever can dry up your body's fluids, which can lead to dehydration

- ❖ Don't drink alcohol
- ❖ Gargle with warm salt water a few times a day to relieve a sore throat. Throat sprays or lozenges may also help relieve the pain

If you live on your own, tell a friend or neighbour you are ill so that they can check on you, bring in some food and do any essential shopping.

Should I take medicine for the flu?

Some antiviral drugs are available for a small number of people who are or who could get seriously ill with flu. These will need to be prescribed by a doctor. No medicine can cure a cold or the flu. Medicine can, however, help relieve some of your flu symptoms.

Many cold/flu products are available without a prescription. Read labels carefully. If you have questions, talk to your doctor or pharmacist. Check with your doctor before giving any medicine to children. The ingredients listed below are found in many cold/flu medicines:

- ❖ Analgesics relieve aches and pains and reduce fever. Warning: Children under 16 years old should not be given aspirin
- ❖ Antitussives tell your brain to stop coughing. Don't take an antitussive if you're coughing up mucus.
- ❖ Expectorants may thin mucus so it can be coughed up more easily.
- ❖ Oral decongestant shrinks the nasal passages and reduce congestion.

Should I call the doctor?

There is usually no need to contact the doctor. The pharmacist will usually be able to recommend what to do. However if you are frail or elderly or have any of the conditions listed earlier you are at greater risk of flu – contact your doctor if concerned. Everyone with flu should consult their doctor if:

- ❖ Your temperature does not settle after 4 to 5 days
- ❖ Your symptoms get worse
- ❖ You think you are seriously ill
- ❖ You develop chest pain or become short of breath

How can I stop it spreading?

The viruses that cause colds and the flu are spread by hand-to-hand contact and by droplets released in the air from sneezes and coughs. Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for at least 10-15 seconds, and avoid touching your eyes or nose.

If you are starting to develop symptoms or have a relative or friend with flu it is important to keep away from hospitals where at all possible. This will help to protect you, patients and staff.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

This document is available on request in different languages, audio tape, Braille format, large print or BSL DVD. Please contact:

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