Hamaspik
MANAGED CARE

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Understanding the Flu: Symptoms, Treatment & Prevention

The flu can be more than a few days of feeling sick. Annual vaccination, early recognition of symptoms, and prompt treatment when needed can help prevent serious illness.

What is the flu?

The flu, also known as influenza, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs.

Although many people recover at home, the flu can cause serious illness. CDC estimates that during the 2024–2025 U.S. flu season, influenza caused approximately **51 million illnesses, 710,000 hospitalizations, and 45,000 deaths**. These estimates highlight why prevention matters, especially for older adults and people with chronic medical conditions. (cdc.gov)

What are the signs and symptoms?

Flu symptoms usually begin suddenly and may include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body aches or headache
- Fatigue
- Vomiting or diarrhea, which are more common in children

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You can have the flu without a fever. Most people recover within a few days to less than two weeks, but complications can occur. Flu may cause pneumonia or worsen existing conditions, such as asthma or heart disease. (cdc.gov)

How does the flu spread?

Flu spreads mainly through droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. These droplets can reach nearby people or be inhaled. Less commonly, infection can occur after touching a contaminated surface and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes.

People may spread flu **about one day before symptoms begin and for five to seven days after becoming sick**. They are usually most contagious during the first three days of illness. Children and people with weakened immune systems may remain contagious longer. This means someone can spread the virus before realizing they are sick. (cdc.gov)

Who is at higher risk of serious complications?

Serious flu complications can affect anyone, but certain groups face greater risk, including:

- Adults age 65 and older
- Children younger than 5, especially those younger than 2
- Pregnant people and those within two weeks after pregnancy ends
- People with asthma, COPD, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, or other chronic conditions
- People with weakened immune systems
- People with certain neurologic conditions or disabilities that make coughing, swallowing, or clearing the airways difficult
- Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities

If you are at higher risk and develop flu symptoms, contact your healthcare provider promptly—even if your symptoms seem mild. CDC recommends early antiviral treatment for people at increased risk who have confirmed or suspected flu. (cdc.gov, cdc.gov)

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What should you do if you get the flu?

Rest, drink fluids, and stay home while you recover. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist which medicines are appropriate for managing fever and aches, particularly if you have chronic conditions or take other medications.

Contact your provider early about antiviral treatment. Prescription medicines such as oseltamivir, also known as Tamiflu, fight influenza viruses. CDC reports that treatment started within the first one to two days can shorten illness by about a day and may reduce some complications.

Treatment can still help after two days, particularly for people who are hospitalized, have severe illness, or are at higher risk of complications. Do not assume it is too late to call. Antibiotics treat bacterial infections; they do not treat the influenza virus itself. (cdc.gov)

When can you return to normal activities?

CDC advises staying home until **both** of the following have been true for at least 24 hours:

- Your symptoms are improving overall.
- You have had no fever without using fever-reducing medicine.

People at higher risk should contact their provider early in the illness rather than waiting to see whether symptoms worsen. (cdc.gov)

When should you seek medical care?

Seek emergency medical care immediately for trouble breathing, persistent chest or abdominal pain or pressure, confusion, difficulty waking, seizures, lack of urination, or severe weakness.

In children, urgent warning signs also include blue lips or face, ribs pulling in with breathing, dehydration, or reduced alertness. Any fever in a baby younger than 12 weeks requires immediate medical evaluation.

Contact a healthcare provider promptly if fever or cough improves and then returns or worsens, a chronic condition gets worse, or you have another severe or concerning

symptom. **Do not wait for a particular temperature before seeking help for serious symptoms.** (cdc.gov)

What are the different types of flu?

There are four types of influenza viruses: A, B, C, and D.

- **Influenza A and B** cause seasonal flu outbreaks in people. Both can cause serious illness.
- **Influenza C** usually causes mild illness and is not thought to cause human epidemics.
- **Influenza D** primarily affects cattle and is not known to cause illness in people.

Seasonal flu vaccines target influenza A and B viruses. (cdc.gov)

How can you protect yourself?

A yearly flu vaccine is the most important step you can take to reduce your risk of flu and its serious complications. CDC recommends annual vaccination for everyone age 6 months and older, with rare exceptions.

Vaccination does not prevent every infection, but it can reduce the severity of illness if you do get sick. It is especially important for people at higher risk and for family members, caregivers, and healthcare workers who spend time with them. (cdc.gov)

The benefits are substantial: CDC estimates that vaccination prevented approximately **10 million illnesses, 180,000 hospitalizations, and 12,000 deaths during the 2024–2025 season**. These are estimates for that season, and vaccine effectiveness varies from year to year. (cdc.gov)

You can add protection through everyday habits:

- Wash your hands regularly.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Improve indoor air quality through ventilation or filtration.

- Consider a well-fitting mask for added protection.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces.
- Limit contact with others when you are sick. (cdc.gov)

What side effects can you expect from the vaccine?

Flu vaccines have a strong safety record, supported by extensive research and decades of use. Common side effects include soreness, redness, or swelling at the injection site, headache, mild fever, and muscle aches. These usually resolve within a few days.

The flu vaccine cannot give you the flu. Flu shots contain inactivated virus or components that cannot cause influenza infection.

Serious allergic reactions are rare. Tell your provider about any previous severe reaction to a flu vaccine. Seek emergency help for difficulty breathing or swelling of the face or throat after vaccination. (cdc.gov)

How can you tell the difference between flu, a cold, and COVID-19?

Symptoms overlap, so how you feel alone may not identify the infection. Testing can help guide diagnosis and treatment. If you are at higher risk, contact your provider promptly rather than delaying care while waiting for a test. (cdc.gov)

When is the best time to get vaccinated?

For most people, September or October is a good time to get a flu vaccine. However, vaccination later in the season can still help while flu viruses are circulating. Protection takes about **two weeks** to develop after vaccination. (cdc.gov, cdc.gov)

Which vaccine should you receive?

Your age and health conditions help determine the appropriate vaccine.

For adults **65 and older**, CDC preferentially recommends a high-dose, adjuvanted, or recombinant flu vaccine. If one of these is unavailable, receive another age-appropriate flu vaccine rather than delaying vaccination.

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The nasal spray is an option for some people ages 2 through 49, but it is not appropriate during pregnancy or for certain medical conditions. Ask your provider which vaccine is right for you. (cdc.gov)

Where can you get a flu shot?

Flu vaccines are available at doctors' offices, pharmacies, and health clinics. Contact Hamaspik Choice Member Services or consult the Provider Directory Search the Hamaspik Choice Provider Directory and participating pharmacy Pharmacies list for help finding a vaccination location and confirming coverage.

A yearly flu vaccine and prompt treatment when symptoms begin can help protect your health and reduce the risk of a serious illness.