

Minnesota Department of Health

# Influenza (Flu) Information for Parents

## What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza is a contagious respiratory disease that can be prevented by immunization. It is not the "stomach flu." It is caused by a virus that attacks the nose, throat, and lungs.

## Are children at high risk for complications of influenza?

- Most children who are healthy can weather the flu, even with a high fever. But that's not always true for the very young, less than 5 years of age, and those with chronic conditions.
- Unfortunately, we see serious complications of the flu and flu-related deaths every year. Serious complications of influenza occur most often in the elderly, young infants, and people – including children – with chronic health conditions. That's always been the case, and that's why we take it very seriously.

## What are the symptoms of influenza?

Influenza symptoms come quickly in the form of fever, dry cough, sore throat, headache, extreme tiredness, nasal congestion, and body aches. These symptoms can be severe and put you in bed for a number of days.

## How is the flu different from a cold?

A cold generally stays up in the head while the flu brings body aches, fever, and extreme fatigue. A child with a cold will

usually keep up his or her normal activities. A child with the flu will often feel too sick to play.

## Should my child be vaccinated?

- The flu shot is highly recommended for children at high risk for serious complications of the flu. These include:
  - All 6- to 59-month-olds
  - Those age 5-18 years with:
    - Heart disease
    - Pulmonary disease including asthma
    - Metabolic disease (diabetes)
    - Immune deficiency
    - Blood disorders
    - Long-term aspirin therapy
  - Adolescent girls who will be pregnant during the influenza season

## What about the nasal vaccine, FluMist?

Healthy individuals 5 to 49 years of age who are contacts and caregivers of infants under 6 months of age have the option of receiving FluMist. Check with your provider.

## What can you do to protect yourself and others?

- Stay at home from school or work if you have a respiratory infection.
- Avoid exposing yourself to others who are sick with a flu-like illness.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue whenever you cough or sneeze. And then throw the tissue away.
- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve.



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- Clean your hands often – with soap and water, or with an alcohol-based, waterless hand sanitizer.
  - If you have an infant, don't expose him or her unnecessarily to large crowds when influenza is in your community. And avoid close contact between the baby and family members who may have influenza (fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough) or other respiratory infections.
  - Do not share anything that goes into the mouth such as drinking cups and straws.
  - Frequently clean commonly touched surfaces (door knob, refrigerator handle, phone, water faucets) if someone in the house has a cold or flu.
  - Do not smoke around children.
- Is so irritable that he or she doesn't want to be held, or
  - Gets better only to become sick again, with fever and a more severe cough.
- If you are concerned that something does not seem right with your child, call your healthcare provider.

### What If You Think You or Your Child Has the Flu?

- **Stay at home if you are ill and encourage others to do so as well.**
- Rest and drink lots of fluids. This will help your body recover from the infection.
- Antibiotics will not help a person recover from the flu, because flu is caused by a virus, not by bacteria. Antiviral medicine is an option for some, but not all.
- Call your doctor or clinic about what to do if you are concerned.
- Children often need help keeping their fever under control. Follow your child's doctor's instructions.
- Take your child to the doctor or the emergency room if he or she:
  - Breathes rapidly or with difficulty,
  - Has bluish skin color,
  - Does not drink enough and becomes dehydrated,
  - Does not wake up or interact with others,

### What about antiviral medicines?

Antiviral medicines are used for treatment and prevention of influenza. Supplies of antivirals are limited and are for use in people who are at high risk for complications of influenza.

Antivirals are most often used to help contain influenza outbreaks in settings such as nursing homes or to protect a high-risk person who is in direct contact with someone who has influenza.

There are risks in taking antivirals. Some people have serious side effects from them.

Antivirals must be taken within two days of being exposed to influenza or within two days of onset of symptoms.

If you have questions about antivirals, talk to your doctor.