

## Facts About Influenza (the Flu)

### What is influenza?

Influenza, often called the 'flu', is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by a virus.

Symptoms of influenza that occur throughout the body are due to the immune response to infection, but the virus usually stays in the airways. Influenza symptoms can include fever, headache, muscle pain, runny nose, sore throat, extreme tiredness, and cough. Although colds and other viruses may cause similar symptoms, symptoms due to the influenza virus tend to be worse.

### How is influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from person to person through breathing, coughing and sneezing. The virus can also be spread when a person touches tiny droplets from coughs or sneezes on another person or on an object, and then touches their own mouth or nose before washing their hands.

Symptoms can begin about one to four days, with an average of two days, after a person is first exposed to the influenza virus. Fever and other body symptoms can usually last seven to 10 days, with the cough and weakness possibly lasting up to one to two weeks more.

An infected person can spread the influenza virus to others even before feeling sick. An infected adult can spread the virus from about one day before and up to five days after symptoms start. Children can spread the virus for a longer time - up to 21 days after symptoms start.

### How dangerous is influenza?

The greatest concern from influenza is that it lowers the body's ability to fight other infections. A person with influenza is at risk of developing other infections, including viral or bacterial pneumonia (inflammation of the lungs). The risk of developing severe symptoms and complications is higher for adults 65 years and older, very young children, and people who have lung or heart diseases, certain chronic health problems, or weakened immune systems.

### How can influenza be prevented?

An influenza shot, also known as a flu shot, can help prevent you from getting sick with influenza or from spreading it to others. That's why it's important for children, adults, and seniors, especially those with ongoing health concerns, to protect themselves against this winter illness.

In BC the vaccine will be available starting in early November. It is best to get the influenza vaccine by the end of November to give the body enough time - about two weeks - to build up immunity before the influenza season starts. Influenza season is usually between December and March. The vaccine can however offer protection if given at any time during the influenza season.

### How can influenza be treated at home?

If you do get sick with influenza, home treatment can help to ease symptoms. Home treatment may include:

- Get plenty of rest. Bed rest will help you avoid spreading the virus to others.
- Drink plenty of extra fluids to replace those lost from fever.
- Avoid smoking and breathing other people's smoke.
- Breathe moist air from a hot shower or from a sink filled with hot water to help clear a stuffy nose.
- Over the counter medications can help relieve symptoms such as pain and fever. Non-prescription influenza remedies are available in the drug store, similar to cold remedies.
- Anti-influenza drugs (antivirals) are available by prescription from your doctor but must be started early. They will shorten symptoms by about 1.5 days if given within 2 days of symptoms starting and by 3 days if given within 12 hours of the start of symptoms.

### When should I call a doctor?

If you do not start to feel better in a few days or your symptoms get worse, you should get medical care right away. Call your doctor right away if you

get sick and have heart or lung disease, any other chronic health concerns that require regular medical attention, if you are frail, or if you have an illness or take treatments that affect your immune system.

### Is it a cold or influenza?

The following table can help you figure out whether you are suffering from a cold or influenza.

<i>Signs and Symptoms</i>	<i>Common Cold</i>	<i>Influenza (the flu)</i>
Fever	Rare	Usual, sudden onset 39°-40°, lasts 3 to 4 days
Headache	Rare	Usual, can be severe
Aches and Pains	Sometimes mild	Usual, often severe
Fatigue and weakness	Sometimes mild	Usual, may last 2-3 weeks or more
Extreme fatigue	Unusual	Usual, early onset, can be severe
Runny, stuffy nose	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Common	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest discomfort, coughing	Sometimes mild to moderate	Usual, can be severe
Complications	Can lead to sinus congestion or earache	Can lead to pneumonia and respiratory failure and cause more complications in persons with chronic diseases.
Prevention	Frequent hand-washing	Yearly influenza shot and frequent hand-washing
Treatment	No specific treatment is available; symptom relief only	Anti-viral drugs by prescription, which can reduce symptoms of the illness.

### For more information, see the following BC HealthFiles:

[#12a Why Seniors Should Get Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccinations](#)

[#12c Influenza \(Flu\) Immunization: Myths and Facts](#)

[#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Immunization Programs in BC](#)

[#85 Hand Washing for Parents and Kids](#)



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