

## Facts about Influenza (the Flu)

### What is influenza?

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

A person with influenza is also at risk of other infections. These include viral or bacterial pneumonia, an infection of the lungs. The risk of complications is greater for seniors 65 years and older, very young children, and people who have lung or heart diseases, certain chronic health problems, or weakened immune systems.

In Canada, it is estimated that up to 7,000 people die from influenza and its complications every year.

### How can influenza be prevented?

You can reduce the risk of catching influenza, or spreading it to others, by washing your hands regularly, eating well and exercising, and getting the influenza vaccine.

Influenza vaccine, also known as a flu shot, can help prevent you from getting sick with influenza or from spreading it to others. In British Columbia, the vaccine is available in October or early November. It is best to try to get the influenza vaccine by the end of November to allow your body enough time – about two weeks – to build immunity before the influenza season starts. However, the vaccine can offer protection if given at any time during the season.

### How is influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from person to person through breathing, coughing and sneezing. The virus can also spread when a person touches tiny droplets from coughs or

sneezes on another person or on an object, and then touches his or her own mouth or nose before washing his or her hands.

An adult can spread the virus from about one day before to five days after symptoms start. Children can spread the virus up to 21 days after symptoms start.

### What are the symptoms?

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, those due to the influenza virus tend to be worse.

Symptoms can begin about one to four days, or an average of two days, after a person is first exposed to the influenza virus. Fever and other symptoms can usually last 7 to 10 days, with the cough and weakness lasting up to two more weeks.

### Home Treatment

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

- Get plenty of rest. Bed rest will also 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.
- Anti-influenza drugs or antivirals are available by prescription, but these must be started early. They will shorten symptoms by about 3 days if given within 12 hours

and by about 1.5 days if given within 2 days of the start of symptoms. Over-the-counter medications can help relieve symptoms such as pain and fever. These are not recommended for children under 6 years of age. Non-prescription influenza remedies are also available at the pharmacy.

### When should I see a doctor?

If you do not start to feel better in a few days or your symptoms get worse, you should see a doctor.

Call a doctor if you get sick and you have the following health concerns:

- Heart or lung disease;
- Any chronic health concern that requires regular medical attention;
- An immune system weakened by disease or medical treatment; or
- Frail or at risk of serious illness or complications.

### Is it influenza or a cold?

The following table can help you determine whether you have influenza or a cold.

<i>Symptoms</i>	<i>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, respiratory failure, and more complications in persons with chronic diseases
Prevention	Frequent hand washing	Yearly influenza vaccine and frequent hand washing
Treatment	No specific treatment is available; symptom relief only	Anti-viral drugs by prescription, which can reduce symptoms

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

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

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

[#12d Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#)

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



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