

Flu facts – tips and treatment

The flu is caused by a highly contagious virus, which is spread by coughs and sneezes. Flu epidemics occur when there are minor changes in the nature of the virus so that more people are susceptible. Pandemics (world-wide epidemics) occur when there are major changes in the virus and can cause very large numbers of deaths. There are three types of flu virus – A, B, and C. Influenza A is more likely to cause epidemics.

Flu symptoms

Flu symptoms develop one to three days after infection and include:

- High fever, chills and sweating
- Weakness
- Headache and generalised muscle and joint pains (legs and back)
- A non-productive cough that can later become more severe and productive.

Flu versus the common cold

The flu is more than a bad cold:

- Cold symptoms last one to two days while the flu can last up to a week.
- The flu causes a high fever. A cold sometimes causes a mild fever.
- Muscular pains and shivering attacks only occur with the flu.
- Colds cause a runny nose while the flu usually starts with a dry sensation in the nose and throat.

Serious complications are rare

In a small proportion of cases flu will lead to:

- **Secondary bacterial pneumonia** – occurs when bacteria invade the lungs. Symptoms include shortness of breath, green-yellow phlegm, chest pains and a temperature. Mortality rates are high but it is less lethal than primary influenza pneumonia.
- **Primary influenza pneumonia** – almost always results in death. Symptoms include difficulty breathing and blue discolouration (cyanosis).
- **Inflammation of the brain or heart** – can occur during recovery from the flu.
- **Reye's syndrome** – leads to liver degeneration and is fatal in 10-40 per cent of cases. Children under 16 years should not be given aspirin as it increases the risk of Reye's syndrome.

People at risk of complications

Complications are more common among patients with an underlying medical condition or reduced immunity. Flu can increase the risk of death or serious complications from the underlying disease.

Flu treatment

The recommended treatment for flu is:

- Bed rest until the temperature has been normal for 48 hours.
- Drink enough fluids to maintain normal urine output.
- Take paracetamol to control fever, aches and pains (adults can use aspirin). Early use of anti-viral medication may shorten the length and severity of illness. Consult a doctor to discuss treatment.
- Avoid exposure to dust, alcohol, fumes, and tobacco smoke as much as possible.

Consult a doctor if symptoms such as difficulty breathing, coughing up green-yellow phlegm or severe headache develop.

Flu immunisation is recommended for older and at-risk groups

Yearly immunisation against the flu and five-yearly against pneumococcal pneumonia is recommended for:

- Everyone over 65 years.
- Koori and Torres Strait Islanders aged over 50.
- Adults and children with chronic heart, lung or kidney disease or metabolic disorders such as diabetes.
- Adults and children receiving immunosuppressive treatment (including long term steroids).
- Residents in nursing homes or other chronic care facilities.

See over ...

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Department of Human Services, Public Health Division
- Your local Community Health Centre

Things to remember

- The flu is not a bad cold
- Flu can occasionally lead to serious complications including death
- Older and at risk groups should be immunised every year against the flu.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by, the Public Health Division of the Department of Human Services, Victoria. The Better Health Channel is part of the Department of Human Services, Victoria.

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