

Asthma & Influenza

Influenza, or Flu, is a serious respiratory illness. It is easily spread from person to person and can lead to severe complications, even death. We ALL are at risk for getting and spreading the flu. Having the flu may keep you home from work or school. If you have asthma or other lung diseases, you are at higher risk of developing complications from the flu. Health officials recommend that everyone six months of age and older receive an influenza vaccination each and every year. Most likely, this includes you and your entire family.

How do I Prevent Getting Influenza?

Get a Flu Vaccine each year

The best way to prevent influenza is to get a flu vaccine every year. The influenza virus is constantly changing. Each year, scientists work together to identify the virus strains that they believe will cause the most illness, and a new vaccine is made based on their recommendations.

Health experts especially recommend that the following people get the seasonal vaccine each year:

- Children aged 6 months up to their 19th birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People asthma and other chronic lung disease
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including health care workers, household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu, and caregivers of children less than 6 months of age who are too young to be vaccinated

There are two vaccine options available in the United States.

1. The flu shot. The viruses in the flu shot are inactivated, which means that someone receiving the vaccine cannot get influenza from the flu shot. The exposure to the inactivated influenza virus helps our bodies develop protection by producing antibodies. After you receive the flu shot it usually takes about two weeks for the body to develop immunity to influenza.

- An American Lung Association study showed that the flu shot is safe for people with asthma.
- The flu shot is covered by Medicare and other health insurance
- Most people experience little or no reaction to the flu shot. The most common side effect is a swollen, red, tender area where the vaccination is given

2. FluMist. FluMist is a nasal spray approved to protect people from getting the flu. The nasal spray is made from live but weakened virus strains. FluMist is only approved by the FDA for healthy people ages 2-49. It has **not been proven safe for high risk populations including people with asthma and COPD**; these individuals should receive a flu shot.

Practice Good Health Habits

- **Wash your hands often.** The most common way to catch the flu is to touch your own eyes, nose or mouth with germey hands. So keep your hands clean, and away from your face. Wash hands with soap and warm water for 30 seconds, or about the amount of time it takes you to sing "Happy Birthday" twice.

- **Keep your distance when you are sick or if you are around someone else who is sick.**
- **Keep it to yourself.** One gift you can give others is to help prevent other people from catching your flu. We highly recommend that you **stay home** from work, school and public places when you are sick. **Cover your mouth and nose** with a tissue or your elbow when coughing or sneezing, but never your hand. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.

Are you at Risk for Getting Influenza?

Each year 36,000 Americans die from flu and its complications. For healthy children and adults, influenza is typically a moderately severe illness. Most people are back on their feet within a week. Certain groups of people are more susceptible to complications related to the flu and are considered "high risk". These groups include the elderly, very young children and people with chronic illnesses or compromised immune systems. For people who are not healthy to begin with, influenza can be very severe and even fatal. If you are considered "high risk", you should do everything you can to prevent the flu.

What are the Symptoms of Influenza?

Influenza is a respiratory infection (not a stomach bug) with symptoms that can affect the entire body. Symptoms include:

- Sudden onset of high fever
- Headache, muscle aches and joint pain
- Cough (usually dry)
- Chills
- Sore throat
- Nasal congestion and runny nose

What Should I Do if I Get Influenza?

Anyone concerned about their illness should consult a health care provider. The best thing to do is to stay home and avoid contact with other people except to get medical care. If you are considered high risk, it is important to contact your health care provider right away. People at high risk are more likely to suffer from severe complications from the influenza virus. Pneumonia is the most common serious complication of influenza.

Treating Influenza

At this time, two antiviral drugs are available: oseltamivir (trade name Tamiflu®), which comes in pill form, and zanamivir (trade name Relenza®), which is a powder that comes in an inhaler. These two drugs, one inhaled and one in pill form, have been shown to reduce flu symptoms if started within a day or two of getting sick. ***It is important to note that people with chronic lung disease, including asthma, should not use the inhaled powder Relenza, because it sometimes worsens breathing problems.***

The Enhancing Asthma Care Project in Illinois is supported by Health Care Service Corporation's Healthy Kids, Healthy Families Initiative and lead by the American Lung Association in Chicago. This joint initiative aims to work with 15 clinics that serve high-risk populations to improve pediatric asthma care to an estimated 30,000 children in Illinois.