

F a c t s

INFLUENZA

What is “the flu”?

Influenza, or the flu, is a common and highly contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus. Various strains of the virus circulate throughout the world year-round and cause local outbreaks. In Canada, flu season usually runs from November to April and an estimated 10-25% of Canadians get the flu each year.

How is it spread?

It is spread through droplets that an infected person coughs or sneezes into the air. You can get the flu by breathing in these droplets through your nose or mouth, or by the droplets landing directly on your eyes. The flu virus is also found on the hands of people with the flu and on surfaces they have touched. It can survive outside the body on unwashed hands for 5 minutes, on tissues or clothing for 8-10 hours and on hard surfaces, such as tables and telephones, for 2 days. You can become infected if you shake hands with an infected person or touch a contaminated surface and transfer the virus to your own eyes, nose or mouth.

When is someone infectious?

The flu takes 1-4 days to cause symptoms in humans, but infected people become contagious the day before symptoms appear. Adults remain infectious and can spread the virus to others for another 5 days. Children can remain infectious for up to 10 days.

What are the symptoms?

A case of influenza typically starts with a headache, chills and cough, which are followed rapidly by fever, loss of appetite, muscle aches, fatigue, runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes, and throat irritation. Children may have nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea but these symptoms are uncommon in adults.

How long will it last?

Symptoms of influenza generally last a week to ten days.

How can I tell if it’s a cold or the flu?

Many people use the terms “flu” or “stomach flu” to describe other illnesses that may actually be a cold or a mild case of food poisoning. There is no such thing as “stomach flu”. Although the common cold is also caused by a virus, the flu and common cold differ in several ways.

— *Health & Environment Facts* —

Frequency of Symptoms		
Symptom	Common Cold	Influenza
fever	uncommon	comes on quickly & often high (102-104 ⁰ F or 38-41 ⁰ C) & lasts 3-4 days
headache	uncommon	very common
aches & pains	mild	common & often quite severe
fatigue & weakness	mild	moderate to extreme & may last 2 or 3 weeks or more
bed ridden	uncommon	common at the start & may last up to 5-10 days
stuffy nose	common	sometimes
sneezing	common	sometimes
sore throat	common	sometimes
cough & chest discomfort	mild to moderate	common & can be severe
complications	sinus or ear infection	pneumonia, kidney failure, respiratory failure, heart failure - can be life threatening

Who can get the flu?

Anyone can get the flu, but some people have a greater risk of developing a serious or life threatening illness because influenza reduces the body's ability to fight other infections. Between 4,000 and 8,000 Canadians die each year from complications of influenza and about 20,000 people with the flu are hospitalized. High risk groups include:

- people over 65 years of age
- all residents of nursing homes, homes for the aged and chronic care facilities/wards
- adults and children with chronic heart or lung conditions
- adults and children who have kidney disease, anemia, cancer, diabetes, organ transplants, or other long term diseases, such as HIV
- children or teens who are treated for long periods with aspirin
- healthy children 6-23 months of age

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- healthy pregnant women
- persons with morbid obesity
- Aboriginal peoples

What precautions can I take?

- Get the flu shot (vaccination) every fall. It takes 2 weeks for the vaccine to become effective.
- Stay away from people sick with the flu.
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water to prevent both picking up and spreading the virus.

What should I do if I get the flu?

- Resting will provide comfort and allow your body to use its energy to fight the infection because you will probably feel very weak and tired until your temperature returns to normal.
- Drink plenty of fluids because they are needed to replace lost fluids because of fever. Warm liquids can help loosen mucus.
- Gargle with a glass of warm water to ease a sore throat. Sugarless hard candy or lozenges may also help.
- Do not smoke because it is very irritating to the damaged airways.
- Take medication recommended by your doctor to reduce fever and relieve aches and pains. If you buy over-the-counter medication at the drug store to treat your symptoms, check with the pharmacist to see if it's the best one for you. Mention if you have a chronic illness or are taking any other medicine.
- Antibiotic treatment is not necessary in cases of viral respiratory infection, but may be required to treat bacterial infections such as pneumonia, which occasionally complicate flu-like illness.
- Antiviral medications can be prescribed to high risk patients to help shorten the disease.
- If you sneeze, blow your nose or cough use a tissue to smother it and immediately dispose of the tissue and wash your hands. The force of sneezing into a tissue will still allow the virus to pass through the tissue onto your hands. Tissues are for single use only, which means one sneeze, cough or nose blow only and then throw it out. If a sneeze or cough is coming and you do not have a tissue, turn your face into your shoulder or elbow. This is referred to as a "guarded" sneeze and forces the germs into your sleeve or clothing and not out into the environment where other people are exposed.
- If you are ill, stay home to avoid spreading the influenza virus to others. If you continue to work and socialize you can spread the virus to others who then become ill and spread the virus to their family and friends, who in turn pass it on to others. The circle of infection is repeated over and over.

— *Health & Environment Facts* —

- Do not visit friends or relatives in a hospital or long-term care facility if you have a cold or the flu.
- Do your best to avoid infants, people over 65 and individuals with chronic health problems because they are more susceptible to serious complications of influenza.

Where can I go for more information?

The following web sites provide information on influenza or you can contact Public Health at 519-376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456.

- Health Canada's Flu Information Web: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/influenza/>
- Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care: www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/flu/about_flu.asp