



Influenza

What Is It?

The flu, which is known medically as influenza, is a contagious respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus. The infection typically is spread by air or by direct contact with an infected person. Most cases occur during the winter months.

The most common types of influenza virus are A and B. Influenza A is the one usually responsible for the annual epidemics. With influenza, the virus usually has mutated (changed) somewhat since the first infection, and the change is enough to fool your immune system. Instead of attacking the virus rapidly, as it would a virus that it had seen before, the immune system responds slowly. By the time the immune response is in full gear, millions of the body's cells already have been infected with the virus.

Symptoms

The flu can cause a variety of mild and/or severe symptoms, depending on the type of virus and your age and overall health.

- Chills
- Moderate to high fever (101 degrees to 103 degrees Fahrenheit)
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Muscle aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Cough
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness

Prevention

There are several options for heading off an attack of influenza:

- **Vaccination:** Vaccination each year is recommended for everyone who wants to reduce the risk of becoming ill with influenza or of transmitting influenza to others.
- **Good hygiene:** The virus usually is passed through the air by coughing. It also is passed by direct contact, such as shaking hands or kissing. For this reason, covering your mouth when you cough and washing your hands frequently can help you to avoid getting the flu or spreading it to others.
- **Antiviral drugs:** Zanamivir (Relenza) and oseltamivir (Tamiflu) can reduce your chances of getting the flu by 70% to 90% if the drugs are taken just before an expected outbreak.

Treatment

To ease symptoms, you should rest and drink at least eight cups of fluids daily. For fever and body aches, you can take over-the-counter pain relievers. Because the flu is a viral infection, antibiotics are not effective.

Online Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
<http://www.cdc.gov/>

How Long Do Flu Symptoms Last?

Influenza symptoms can last for as few as 24 hours or for a week or more. A typical case of the flu lasts four or five days.

