

INFLUENZA

Influenza (also known as flu) is a very common respiratory disease. Influenza is not what is commonly referred to as “the stomach flu,” which is a term used by some to describe illnesses causing vomiting or diarrhea. Every year, millions of people in the United States get influenza. Influenza often results in more severe illness than other respiratory viruses.

CAUSE Influenza virus. The two main types of influenza viruses are type A and type B. Within each type there are many related strains or subtypes, which can change every year. This is the reason a person can get influenza more than once and why a person should get vaccinated every year. Influenza usually occurs in the United States between November and April.

SYMPTOMS Starts quickly with fever, chills, body aches, headache, cough, runny or stuffy nose, and sore throat. Illness usually lasts 3 to 7 days. Children may develop ear infections, pneumonia, or croup as a result of influenza infection.

Serious complications of influenza occur most often in the elderly, young infants, or people with chronic health problems or weakened immune systems.

SPREAD When a person with influenza coughs or sneezes tiny droplets with influenza virus into the air, and another person breathes them in. By touching the secretions from the nose and mouth of an infected person and also by touching hands, tissues, or other items soiled with these secretions and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.

INCUBATION It takes from 1 to 4 days, usually 2 days, from the time of infection until symptoms begin.

CONTAGIOUS PERIOD Most contagious during the 24 hours before the symptoms begin (very young children may be contagious even earlier). After the symptoms start, children can be contagious up to 7 days and adults are generally contagious for 5 days.

EXCLUSION Childcare and School: Until fever is gone and the child is well enough to participate in routine activities.

DIAGNOSIS Recommend parents/guardians call their healthcare provider if their child has a high fever and/or persistent cough. Viral cultures may be taken.

TREATMENT Antiviral medications (antivirals) can shorten the course of illness if given within 36 to 48 hours after the symptoms begin. Influenza is a viral illness; therefore, antibiotics will not be effective.

DO NOT GIVE ASPIRIN or SALICYLATE-CONTAINING MEDICATIONS TO ANY CHILD OR ADOLESCENT UNDER 18 YEARS OF AGE.

PREVENTION/CONTROL

- Annual influenza vaccinations are recommended for:
 - All children 6 months to 18 years of age.
 - All adults 50 years and older.
 - Anyone 6 months of age and older with chronic health conditions.
 - People who care for children less than 5 years of age (especially for children under 6 months of age).

PREVENTION/CONTROL CONTINUED

In addition, flu vaccine can be given to anyone else who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza. The vaccine is usually given in the late fall. People who were not vaccinated in the fall may be vaccinated any time during the influenza season. For current recommendations check the MDH website at www.health.state.mn.us/immunize

- Cover nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, or cough/sneeze into your sleeve. Dispose of used tissues.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water after contact with secretions from the nose or mouth or handling used tissues. **Thorough handwashing is the best way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.**
- Clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces (door knobs, refrigerator handle, water faucets, cupboard handles) at least daily. (See pgs 34-36.)
- Clean and sanitize mouthed toys, objects, and surfaces at least daily and when soiled. (See pgs 34-36.)
- DO NOT allow sharing of anything that goes into the mouth such as drinking cups, straws, water bottles, eating utensils.
- Stay home if you are ill. Encourage parents/guardians to keep ill children at home.

For more information, call Hennepin County HSPHD-Epidemiology at (612) 543-5230 or call your local health department.