

Self Care for Influenza

What is influenza (the flu)?

Influenza is a respiratory disease caused by a virus. It can cause a variety of symptoms, such as fever, cough, aches and physical exhaustion. People usually recover from the flu without medical help. However, very young children and the elderly have a higher risk of severe illness, as well as people with lowered immunity (ex: those with chronic illnesses).

How is influenza spread?

Influenza spreads easily from person to person by coughing or sneezing, by hand-to-hand contact with an infected person, or after handling objects contaminated by infected people. The virus can survive on hard surfaces for up to 48 hours, on cloth, paper or tissue for up to 12 hours and on hands for about five minutes, long enough for you to inadvertently touch your mouth, nose or eyes and transfer the virus to your body.

People can spread influenza up to 24 hours before symptoms appear and up to seven days after. Not everyone who gets influenza develops symptoms but they still may be able to spread it to others, especially if they cough or sneeze.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Symptoms of influenza include:

- sudden fever of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher,
- cough, AND
- one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, or physical exhaustion.
- Children may also feel sick to their stomach, vomit or have diarrhea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults.
- Elderly people and people with lowered immunity may not develop a fever.

How do I know if I have a fever?

Fever is a sign that the body is fighting an infection or other illness. You or your child has a fever if body temperature is 38°C (100.4°F) or higher.

Touching a forehead or neck is not a reliable way to check if someone has a fever. The best way to measure a person's temperature is by using a digital thermometer placed in the mouth (oral), the ear (tympanic) or under the armpit (axillary). The use of glass mercury thermometers is not recommended. You can buy a digital thermometer at your drug store.

For infants and young children, the safest way to take a temperature is in the centre of the armpit. If the child is over two years of age, an ear thermometer can be used. Taking the temperature in the mouth is unsafe because young children can bite

and break the thermometer. Also, the reading can be wrong because it is hard to keep a thermometer under a child's tongue. For more information on taking a child's temperature, please see the fact sheet *Caring for a Child with a Fever* available at <http://www.gov.mb.ca/health/documents/childhealth.html>

What basic precautions should I take if I think I have influenza?

If you develop symptoms of influenza, you may be contagious for up to a week. Taking the following precautions will help to reduce the spread of the disease:

- Stay home from school or work and limit contact with others to reduce the chance of infecting them.
- Cover a cough or sneeze by coughing or sneezing into your elbow or sleeve or using a tissue to cover your nose and mouth. Place the tissue in the garbage.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth to reduce the spread of germs.

What about children?

Children should take the same precautions as adults, including washing their hands regularly and covering their nose and mouth when coughing. Young children may need help with hand washing. Children with flu-like symptoms should stay home from school or day care. Routinely clean surfaces in areas where children play to avoid the spread of germs. If you have

questions or are concerned that your child may need care, contact your health care provider or Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 or 1-888-315-9257.

Do people I live with or visitors need to take any precautions?

People who are ill should try to limit contact with others as much as possible. However, there may be times when this is not possible. To limit the spread of the virus, family members, caregivers, and other visitors, should:

- Wash their hands after being in direct contact with someone who has influenza (or any other respiratory infection).
- Wash their hands and a child's hands after wiping a child's nose.
- Wash their hands after coughing, sneezing or wiping their nose.
- Wash their hands after touching objects handled by someone who has influenza.
- Clean surfaces (such as toys, bathroom taps and doorknobs) with household cleaners after an ill person has touched them.

What can I do at home to treat a fever?

- Dress in lightweight clothing and keep the room temperature around 20°C (68°F).
- Drink plenty of fluids in order to replace body fluids lost in sweat. If the person who is sick has urine (pee) that is darker than usual, they need to drink more.

- Offer small, nutritious meals. People sick with influenza may not be very hungry.
- Take acetaminophen (ex: Tylenol®, Tempra®). Use the dose and schedule recommended on the package or by your doctor or pharmacist. Ibuprofen (ex: Advil®, Motrin®) may be used for children older than six months and for adults.
- Do not give acetylsalicylic acid, also known as ASA, (ex: Aspirin®) to anyone under 18 years of age because it can lead to brain and liver damage (Reye's Syndrome).

How can I treat other symptoms of influenza?

- Get plenty of rest.
- Gargle with warm salt water if you have a sore throat.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to help with a stuffy nose.
- If a baby is having problems breathing because of a stuffy nose, use a rubber suction bulb to clear the mucous. These are available at drug stores. You may also use saline nose drops or spray if the mucous is very thick.

There are many over-the-counter cough and cold medicines sold in stores that do not require a doctor's prescription. These include decongestants, cough syrups, nasal drops and antihistamines. Over-the-counter cough and cold medicines should not be given to children under six years of age unless prescribed by a doctor. Check with your doctor or pharmacist

before taking or giving over-the-counter medicines to anyone. This is especially important if the person is under 12 years of age, is taking other medicines or has a chronic medical condition. Be sure to read label instructions carefully and do not take more than recommended.

When should I seek medical care?

The decision to seek medical care will be affected by factors such as age, existing health problems or the symptoms you are experiencing at the time.

People with symptoms of influenza should contact their health care provider if they:

- have heart or lung disease,
- have a chronic condition that requires regular medical attention,
- are frail, or
- have an illness or are on treatments that suppress (weaken) the immune system.

People who are normally healthy and have symptoms of influenza should seek medical attention as soon as possible, if they experience any of the following:

- breathing is difficult or painful;
- coughing up bloody sputum (phlegm or saliva);
- wheezing;
- presence of fever for three to four days along with not getting better or getting worse;
- sudden return of high fever and other symptoms after initial improvement;
- extreme ear pain;

- extreme sleepiness, difficult to wake up, or disoriented and confused.

People who need to seek medical care should contact their health care provider to report illness by telephone (or other remote means) before seeking medical care.

People who have difficulty breathing or are believed to be severely ill should seek immediate medical attention by going to the nearest hospital emergency department or calling 911.

When should I seek medical care for a child?

Almost all children with influenza have a fever. The degrees (or height) of a fever do not tell you how serious your child's illness is. How a child acts is usually a better sign. A child with a mild infection can have a high fever, while a child with a severe infection might have no fever at all.

It is recommended that you contact your doctor or take your child to an emergency department if your child has signs of influenza and:

- has lung or heart disease;
- has an illness or is taking treatment that affects the immune system;
- takes acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) regularly for a medical condition or has a chronic illness requiring regular medical care;
- has a fever and is less than six months old;
- has a fever for more than 72 hours;
- is excessively cranky, fussy or irritable;

- is not interested in playing with toys or is unusually sleepy, listless or does not respond;
- has trouble breathing when resting, is wheezing, has chest pain when breathing or is coughing excessively (a lot) or coughing up bloody sputum (phlegm or saliva);
- drinks very little fluid and has not urinated (peed) at least once every six hours when awake;
- has vomited for more than four hours or has severe diarrhea;
- has a fever and a rash or any other signs of illness that worry you, or
- is still not feeling better after five days or was feeling better and suddenly develops a new fever.

Take your child immediately to a hospital emergency department or call 911 if your child:

- has severe trouble breathing or blue lips;
- is limp or unable to move;
- is hard to wake up or does not respond;
- has a stiff neck;
- seems confused; or
- has a seizure (convulsion/fit).

Where can I get more information?

For more information on influenza and self care, contact Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 or 1-888-315-9257 or your primary health care provider.