

Influenza

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The flu – every child seems to get it at some time or another, right? But what is the flu? Can it be prevented? Should my child get a flu shot? These are just a few of the most common questions parents have about **influenza** (the flu). The following will help you understand what influenza is (and what it is *not*), how to prevent it, and treatments that are now available.

What Is The Flu?

The flu is an illness caused by a virus. There are three different flu viruses, types A, B, and C. Types A (the most common) and B (usually milder) cause the usual epidemics of the flu, between late November and early March. Since each of the types of flu virus has different strains, every year the flu is slightly different and can infect people several times during their lifetime.

The flu can last a week or longer. Your child will usually feel the worst during the first 2 or 3 days, and may have any of the following symptoms: Sudden Fever (usually between 101-104), Chills, Extreme Tiredness, Headache & Body Aches, Dry Hacking Cough, Sore Throat, Stuffy Nose.

Contrary to public myth, the flu is **not** a vomiting and diarrhea illness. Many people misuse the word “flu”, using it to refer to any illness causing abdominal pain, vomiting, and/or diarrhea. THIS IS INCORRECT. Few people with influenza experience vomiting or diarrhea, though a mild tummy ache is not unusual.

There are usually no serious complications from the flu, although sometimes an ear infection, sinus infection, or pneumonia might develop. Children under age two years are at highest risk for developing pneumonia. Call your doctor’s office if your child has a fever longer than 4 days, or has a fever that returns after having been gone more than 24-48 hours, or if he experiences a sudden worsening of his cough.

How Is The Flu Spread?

The flu is spread from person to person by direct hand-to-hand contact, by virus droplets being passed through the air (coughing, sneezing), and by indirect contact (such as contaminated toys, doorknobs, faucet handles, countertops et al). It spreads very easily, especially in daycare, pre-school, and school-aged children. Adults are then easily exposed and can get the disease. The virus is transmitted just as symptoms begin, or in the first several days of the illness.

How Is Flu Treated?

By extra rest, extra fluids, light and easy-to-digest meals, and ibuprofen for comfort. Never use aspirin in children.

There are anti-viral agents that can help speed recovery by a day or two, but these medications have side effects, and must be started in the first day or two of the illness. It is difficult to know when to use medications, because in the first 24 to 48 hours the illness may seem to be an ordinary cold. Antibiotics are of **no** benefit, because the flu is a viral illness.

Prevention is the best treatment. Good hygiene is the best way to prevent flu from spreading to other family members. If your child has the flu, or any respiratory illness, teach her to cover her mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, by doing so into her elbow. Teach her how to blow her nose properly, and to use facial tissues both to blow her nose, and to catch sneezes. Teach her to wash her hands afterwards; hand sanitizer is best. Avoid kissing your child on or around the mouth or face, though she will need plenty of hugs while she is sick.

Do not let children share toothbrushes, pacifiers, utensils, cups, washcloths, or towels, especially when they are sick. Use disposable paper cups in the bathroom. Use a disinfectant regularly on

countertops, doorknobs, toilet and faucet handles, even on toys; viruses can live for more than 30 minutes on such surfaces.

The Best Prevention: Vaccination

There are safe and effective vaccines to protect against the flu. However, they are mainly recommended for children with health problems that make it especially risky for them to get the flu. This includes children with the following:

- Heart disease
- Lung disease, including asthma
- Immune problems, including HIV
- Blood diseases
- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Chronic kidney disease and metabolic diseases

Children 6 months or older with these health problems should get a flu shot each fall, as should everyone in their household.

Children 6 months to 2 years of age also automatically qualify for the influenza vaccine. Besides the elderly, this age group has the highest risk of developing complications from the flu.

For children under 9 years of age, the vaccine requires 2 injections, given one month apart the first year it is given. After that, each year only one dose is needed.

The best time to get the flu vaccine is in late October to early November – before the flu season starts – but vaccination should begin earlier for those needing two shots.

Since the strains of flu are different every year, a new flu vaccine is developed each year as well. The vaccine is made from killed flu viruses and helps the immune system fight the flu. Most children are immune within 2 weeks of getting the vaccine. Side effects are almost always minor and include soreness at the site of the injection and a low-grade fever. You CANNOT get the flu from the vaccine.

Even though there are few side effects to the vaccine, production of the vaccine involves the use of eggs. If your child has had a serious allergic reaction to eggs or egg products, the vaccine should not be given.

The flu vaccine still contains trace amounts of thimerosal, a preservative that some worry may be a contributing factor in the development of autism. However, large studies in various countries around the world have found no link between thimerosal and autism. In the United States, no other vaccine has contained this ingredient since January of 2003, and yet the rate of autism continues to rise, giving further evidence to the absence of a link between the two.

How To Tell The Difference Between A Cold And The Flu?

Both the flu and colds are caused by viruses, and share many symptoms, but there are differences. A child with a common cold usually has a lower fever, a runny nose, and less coughing than with the flu. Children with the flu usually feel much sicker, achy, miserable. Children who have colds usually have enough energy to play and keep up with their usual day-to-day routines, though they may be more tired by evening, and sleep more than usual. The flu, however, keeps most children in bed for several days.