

## **What is influenza?**

Influenza, commonly called “the flu”, is caused by a virus that primarily affects the nose, throat, bronchial airways, and lungs. Influenza A or B may circulate in the United States during late fall and winter. Each type of influenza virus has many different strains, which tend to change from year to year.

## **What are the symptoms of influenza?**

Compared with other viral respiratory infections that also tend to occur during the fall and winter months, influenza infection usually causes a more severe illness. Fever of 100° F to 103° F (possibly higher in children), chills, sore throat, stuffy nose, cough, extreme fatigue, and body aches are typical symptoms. Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can sometimes accompany influenza infection, especially in children, however these symptoms are usually not the primary problem. The term “stomach flu” is sometimes used to describe gastrointestinal illnesses (diarrhea, nausea, vomiting), but this is a misnomer because bacteria, protozoa, or viruses other than influenza cause these infections.

## **How is influenza spread?**

Influenza is spread from person to person by respiratory droplets expelled during talking, coughing, laughing or sneezing. Transmission may also occur by direct contact with contaminated objects and then touching one’s mouth or nose. The contagious period can vary, but generally begins the day before symptoms appear and then continues for up to one week.

## **How soon after exposure do symptoms of influenza appear?**

The incubation period, or the time from exposure to the first onset of symptoms, is one to five days. Most people who have influenza recover completely in one to two weeks, but some persons develop serious and potentially life-threatening medical complications, such as pneumonia. In an average year, flu-related complications are associated with an estimated 114,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths in the United States.

## **How is influenza diagnosed?**

Healthcare providers will often diagnose flu based on the typical symptoms of fever, chills, headache, cough, and body aches and the knowledge that influenza virus has been laboratory confirmed in the same geographic area. Rapid screening tests for flu may be performed at a physician’s clinic. Healthcare providers may also request a viral culture where a swab of the nose or throat is collected and sent to a laboratory in order to attempt to grow and isolate the influenza virus.

## **What is the treatment for influenza?**

Most persons who get the flu are adequately treated with fluids and rest. Prescriptions are available to prevent or reduce the severity of influenza, but some antiviral medications are only effective against type A influenza virus. All antiviral drugs must be started within 48 hours of illness onset to be effective. Antibiotics do not work against the influenza virus and therefore will not help a person recover from the flu.

## **Who should get vaccinated each year in Oklahoma?**

In general, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting the flu can get vaccinated. However, CDC recommends that certain people should get vaccinated each year who are at higher risk of having complications or are in close contact to those at higher risk. These people include:

- Children aged 6 months up to their 19th birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:
  - a. Health care workers
  - b. Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
  - c. Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than 6 months of age (these children are too young to be vaccinated)

**How can people get an influenza vaccination?**

Persons should contact their healthcare provider or local county health department to see if vaccine is available and inquire about clinic times.

**When should people get an influenza vaccination?**

It is never too late to get vaccinated during the influenza season even in December or later. Influenza outbreaks can happen as early as October but most of the time influenza activity peaks in January or later.

**What about the nasal spray influenza vaccine that does not require a shot?**

FluMist® is the first flu vaccine in the United States that is given as a nasal mist instead of a shot. FluMist® is approved for active immunization of healthy children, adolescents, and adults 2 to 49 years of age. After vaccination with FluMist®, disease-fighting antibodies develop in your nose and your bloodstream. FluMist® is made from a weakened version of a live influenza virus, but it is designed to help protect the body from the flu without actually causing a case of the flu. Because the intranasal vaccine does contain live virus, persons who are in close contact with others who have conditions that severely suppress their immune system should not receive FluMist®.

**What can be done to control or prevent influenza?**

An important way to prevent influenza is to get vaccinated. Influenza vaccines provide protection against two strains of type A influenza and one strain of type B influenza. Because influenza viruses are prone to frequent “drifts” in their genetic makeup, the composition of the vaccine changes from year to year to best target the strains of virus expected to be circulating in the coming season. The 2008-2009 influenza vaccine protects against H3N2 influenza A Brisbane/10-like virus, the H1N1 influenza A Brisbane/59-like virus, and the influenza B Florida-like virus.

It takes 10-14 days after receiving a “flu shot” injection for one’s body to produce protective levels of antibodies. Immunity develops more quickly after receiving an intranasal vaccine (FluMist®).

Good hygiene habits prevent and reduce the transmission of influenza and other respiratory viruses by:

- covering your mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when sneezing or coughing
- disposing of tissues properly
- washing hands frequently
- using alcohol-based hand sanitizers if hands are not visibly soiled

When sick with a fever and cough:

- stay home from work, school, church, or other daily activities outside of the home
- avoid other crowded areas or events like shopping malls or sports arenas
- do not visit nursing homes, hospitals, or other long-term care facilities
- do not visit people at increased risk for severe flu-related complications

