

Flu: A guide for parents of children or adolescents with chronic health problems

What is the flu?

Influenza (flu) is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by the influenza viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old, and children and adolescents with chronic health conditions are at greater risk for serious flu complications. These flu complications can result in hospital stays and even death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year.

How do I know if my child is at greater risk for flu-related complications?

- **Your child is at risk if he/she has any of the following conditions:**
- **Asthma**
- **Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions** including disorders of the brain; spinal cord; peripheral nerves and muscles such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy (seizure disorders), stroke, intellectual disability (mental retardation), moderate to severe developmental delay, muscular dystrophy, or spinal cord injury
- **Chronic lung disease (such as cystic fibrosis)**
- **Heart disease (such as congenital heart disease and congestive heart failure)**
- **Blood disorders (such as sickle cell disease)**
- **Endocrine disorders (such as diabetes mellitus)**
- **Kidney disorders**
- **Liver disorders**
- **Morbid Obesity**
- **Metabolic disorders (such as inherited metabolic disorders and mitochondrial disorders)**
- **Weakened immune system** due to disease or medication (such as children or adolescents with HIV or AIDS, cancer, or those on chronic steroids)
- **Receiving long-term aspirin therapy for chronic disorders**
- **Pregnancy**

What are symptoms of the flu?

Symptoms of the flu can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue, and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea. It is important to note that some people sick with flu may not have a fever.

What is a flu complication?

Most people who get the flu will recover in a few days to less than 2 weeks, but some people will develop complications (health problems such as pneumonia) as a result of the flu, some of which can be life-threatening and result in death.

Pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections are 3 examples of complications from flu. The flu can also make chronic health conditions worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks while they have the flu.

How can I protect my child against the flu?

- **Flu Vaccines:** The most important thing is for your child to get a flu vaccine every year. Children younger than 6 months are at high risk of serious flu illness, but are too young to be vaccinated. People who care for them should be vaccinated instead.
- **Distance:** Your child should avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- **Hand washing:** Wash hands often with soap and running water (for as long as it takes to sing the “Happy Birthday” song twice). If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub. Help your child in hand washing if needed.
- **Germ control:** Encourage your child to avoid touching his eyes, nose, mouth, and to use a tissue or elbow to cough or sneeze into.
- **Cleaning:** Keep surfaces in the house and toys clean by wiping them down with a household disinfectant according to the directions on the product label.
- **Health:** If your child has a chronic health condition, make sure that it is under the best control.
- **Plan:** Have a plan in case your child becomes sick with the flu.

What can I do if my child gets sick?

- **Doctor:** Call or take your child to the doctor if your child develops flu-like symptoms. The doctor may want to begin antiviral drugs as quickly as possible. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines that fight against the flu in your body
- **Home care:** Keep your child at home, except for doctor visits, until at least 24 hours after there is no longer a fever.
- **Covering coughs:** Ensure that your child covers coughs and sneezes.
- **Rest and fluids:** Make sure your child gets plenty of rest and drinks clear fluids (water, broth, sports drinks, electrolyte beverages for infants such as Pedialyte®) to keep from becoming dehydrated.
- **Medicines:** Ask your doctor about fever-reducing medicines based on your child’s age. Children younger than 4 years of age should not be given the-counter cold medicines without approval from a health care provider. Aspirin should not be given to children or teenagers who have the flu; this can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye’s syndrome.

- **Sick room:** Keep your sick child in a separate room (sick room) in the house. Limit, as much as possible contact with other members of the house who are not sick. Make one person in the house the main caregiver for the sick child.
- **Protect pregnant women:** Pregnant women should get a flu shot. If possible pregnant women should not be the main caregiver of a child with the flu.

When can my child go back to school after being sick?

Usually, your child should stay home for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone. The fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine, such as Tylenol®. A fever is defined as 100°F/37.8°C or greater.

Is the flu vaccine safe for my child with chronic health problems?

Yes. The flu vaccine is approved for use in children older than 6 months, including healthy children and children with chronic health problems. Because children with chronic health conditions are at a higher risk of getting flu related complications; it is especially important that they get a flu shot.

What types of vaccine should my child receive and how many doses?

There are two types of flu vaccines available – the shot and the nasal spray. **Children with chronic health conditions should get the shot only.** Children younger than 9 years old may need 2 doses of the vaccine. Talk with your doctor to discuss how many doses are recommended for your child.

How can I plan ahead with my child's school or childcare?

Find out your child's school or childcare provider's plan for flu season. Let them know your child is at high risk for flu-related problems.

CDC recommends that all children 6 months and older, especially those with chronic health conditions get a seasonal flu vaccine.

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov or www.flu.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO

Information obtained from the Centers from Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at: http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/freeresources/risk/Flu_brochure_english_press.pdf on 10-7-2011.

