

INFLUENZA (FLU)

What is influenza?

Influenza (the flu) is a contagious respiratory infection caused by influenza A and B viruses. It spreads easily from person to person and is most common during the late fall and winter months.

Some people are at higher risk of serious illness from the flu, including:

- Pregnant individuals (the flu vaccine is safe during pregnancy)
- Residents of long-term care homes or other group living settings
- People aged 65 and older
- Children aged six months to five years
- First Nations, Inuit, and Métis individuals
- People with chronic health conditions or weakened immune systems (e.g., asthma, heart disease, diabetes)

Post-COVID note: Individuals recovering from COVID-19 or with long COVID may also be more vulnerable to complications from influenza.

People who live with or care for those at higher risk should also get vaccinated to help protect them.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Symptoms usually appear one to four days after exposure. Flu symptoms are usually more intense than a cold and may include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Muscle aches
- Headache
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue

Children may also experience nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.

Most people recover in five to 10 days, but some but some — especially older adults, pregnant individuals, and those with chronic conditions — may develop serious complications like pneumonia and may need hospital care.

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How does influenza spread?

The flu spreads through droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. These droplets can land on another person's face, mouth, or eyes. It can also spread by touching contaminated surfaces or objects (like phones or toys) and then touching your face.

People with the flu can spread the virus:

- One day before symptoms appear
- Up to five days after getting sick
- Children and people with weakened immune systems may spread it for longer

How can influenza be prevented?

The best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated every year. The flu vaccine is recommended for everyone aged six months and older. It's safe, effective, and available at participating pharmacies, medical walk-in clinics, health care provider's offices and some workplace clinics. Get vaccinated early — it takes about two weeks for full protection.

Other prevention tips:

- Wash your hands well and often with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds
 - If unavailable, use hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue out immediately. Wash your hands afterward. Cough in your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue
- Avoid large crowds
- Don't touch your face
- Stay home when you're sick
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and shared items

Be sure to eat healthy, stay active and get plenty of sleep to keep your immune system strong.

How is influenza treated?

In some cases, a health care provider may prescribe antiviral medication. These can help shorten the illness and reduce symptoms if taken within 48 hours of getting sick. Antivirals are especially important for people at higher risk of complications and may help prevent hospitalization.

For more information about the flu and the influenza vaccine, visit york.ca/flu.