



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

**Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control Division
1010 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, MA 02118
Phone: 617-534-5611 Fax: 617-534-5905**

Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza (often called “flu”) is a contagious disease caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms include sudden fever, cough, muscle aches, headache and general weakness. Flu may also cause a runny nose and sore throat. These symptoms can range from mild to severe.

Is flu dangerous?

It can be, particularly for the very young, the very old and for those with underlying medical problems. Most people have mild illness lasting a few days; however, some may develop pneumonia or other serious complications. Every year, flu causes thousands of hospital admissions in the United States.

How is flu spread?

The viruses that cause flu live in the nose and throat and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. People nearby can then breathe in the virus. Flu symptoms usually start 1 to 3 days after a person breathes in the virus. People can spread the flu virus 1 day before their symptoms begin until 1 week afterward.

When does flu occur?

In New England, flu season usually begins in December and lasts through March. A flu-like illness in the summer is usually not the flu; however, travelers to certain places outside the United States may get the flu at other times of the year.

How can I protect myself against the flu?

There are two types of immunizations that can protect against the flu. One is a shot given in the arm and the other is a spray given in the nose. A person needs to get a flu immunization every year to be protected.

Who should get a flu vaccine?

The following groups should receive a flu vaccine because they are at an increased risk of developing serious illness from the flu.

People at high risk for complications from the flu, including:

- Children aged 6 months until their 19th birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions
- 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:

- Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu (see above)
- Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than 6 months of age (these children are too young to be vaccinated)
- Healthcare workers

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Who should NOT get a flu shot?

Infants younger than 6 months of age and people who have had a severe allergic (anaphylactic) reaction to eggs or to a previous dose of influenza vaccine should not get the flu shot. People with a history of [Guillain-Barré syndrome](#) should talk to their healthcare provider before getting a flu shot.

How safe is the flu shot?

The flu vaccine is made with killed viruses. It cannot give you the flu. The most common side effect from a flu shot is a sore arm that lasts 1 to 2 days. Sometimes people can have a mild fever, headache, chills or muscle aches for 2 days. More serious reactions to flu vaccine are very rare.

Who can get the flu spray immunization?

The flu spray (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”) is made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu. The spray, given in the nose, is an option for healthy people 2 through 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

What can I do to prevent becoming sick with influenza?

There are a number of things that you can do to lessen your chance of developing influenza or any respiratory illness.

- Clean your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, if possible

How can I stop the spread of germs if I have an influenza-like illness?

There are many ways you can help prevent the spread of germs.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue every time you cough or sneeze. Then throw the used tissue in a waste basket. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your upper sleeve.
- After coughing or sneezing, always clean your hands with soap & water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Stay home when you are sick. It is recommended that you stay at home (5 days for an adult and 7 days for children) after onset of symptoms or until symptoms have resolved, whichever is shorter.
- Do not share eating utensils, drinking glasses, towels or other personal items, especially with people who are ill.

What should I do if I get the flu?

Generally, the flu lasts 3-7 days. Drink plenty of fluids, rest and avoid smoking. Take non-aspirin pain relievers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Decongestants may help relieve a stuffy nose or sinus pressure. Talk to your doctor if symptoms seem severe or ongoing.

Are there any medications that I can take?

Antiviral medicines can be used to treat influenza, but are most often recommended for persons at high risk of developing complications from the flu. To be effective, these medicines must be started within 24-48 hours of symptom onset. These drugs can reduce the symptoms of the flu and shorten the time you are sick by 1-2 days.

**For more information, please contact
Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control
(617) 534-5611 or www.bphc.org**