



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Boston Public Health Commission
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Influenza

What is influenza?

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

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, but it can be longer. Most people can spread the flu virus 1 day before their symptoms begin until about a week afterward.

Is flu dangerous?

It can be dangerous, especially 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.

Who should get a flu vaccine?

A flu vaccine is the best way to prevent the flu. It is recommended that everyone 6 months of age and older get a flu vaccine. A person needs to get a flu vaccine every year to be protected. There are two ways to take the seasonal flu vaccine. One is a shot given in the arm (called the Flu Shot) and the other is a mist given in the nose (called the Flu Mist)

Should I get the flu shot or the flu mist vaccine?

It is best to talk with your healthcare provider about which vaccine is best for you. In general, the flu shot is available for anyone 6 months of age and older who has not had a severe allergic reaction to vaccine components, such as eggs, or to a previous dose of flu vaccine. Anyone with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome should talk with their doctor before getting a flu vaccine.

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

When should I get the vaccine?

Flu season runs from October through May. Getting a vaccine earlier in the flu season can provide longer protection against the virus however, vaccines are available all season. Adults and older children will only need one dose of vaccine to be protected; some children under 9 will need two doses. Check with your doctor to make sure.

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Can I get the flu from the flu vaccine?

It is not true that the flu vaccine can give you the flu but you should keep in mind that it takes two weeks after getting vaccinated to be fully protected against the flu. Be sure to take other precautions against getting the flu during this time.

How can I prevent the spread of flu?

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.
- Clean your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Stay home when you are sick. It is recommended that you stay at home for 24 hours after your fever has gone away without the use of fever reducing medicine or for 4 days after you first get sick, whichever is longer. Avoid close contact with people who are sick, if possible.

What should I do if I get the flu?

Generally, the flu lasts 3 to 7 days. Drink plenty of fluids and get a lot of rest. Medication such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Motrin®, Nuprin® or Advil®) can be used to help relieve a fever. Be sure to follow package directions for the age of the person taking the medicine. Do not give aspirin to children due to the risk of Reye's Syndrome, a rare but serious illness. Decongestants may help relieve a stuffy nose or sinus pressure in adults and older children. Talk to your doctor if symptoms seem severe or ongoing.

Are there any medications that I can take?

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

**For more information, please contact
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