

# The Flu (Influenza)



The flu (influenza)—every child gets it at some time or another. What is the flu? Can it be prevented? Should my child get a flu shot or immunization? These are a few of the most common questions parents have about the flu. Read more to learn about this illness.

## What is the flu?

The flu is an illness caused by a virus. There are 3 different flu viruses—types A, B, and C. Types A (the most common) and B (usually milder) cause outbreaks of the flu.

Each year the flu is slightly different because there are many different types of flu viruses. The flu season most commonly occurs between January and March. People can be infected several times during their lifetime because the virus changes.

The flu can last a week or even longer. Your child usually will feel the worst during the first 2 or 3 days. Flu symptoms include

- A sudden fever (temperature usually above 101°F)
- Chills and shakes with the fever
- Extreme tiredness
- Headache and body aches
- Dry, hacking cough
- Sore throat
- Vomiting and belly pain
- Stuffy, runny nose

There usually are no serious complications from the flu. However, sometimes an ear infection, a sinus infection, or even pneumonia may develop. Talk with your pediatrician if your child's ear hurts, his cough persists, or his fever lasts beyond 3 to 4 days.

## How the flu is spread

The flu is spread from person to person in the following ways:

- Direct hand-to-hand contact
- Indirect contact (eg, if your child touches a contaminated surface like a toy or doorknob and then touches her eyes, nose, or mouth)
- Virus droplets passed through the air from coughing or sneezing

The flu spreads very easily, especially to preschool- and school-aged children and adults who spend time with children. The virus usually spreads during the first several days of the illness.

## Treatment

In children older than 1 year, type A flu can be treated with antiviral drugs if given in the first day or two of the illness. This can speed recovery. Under some circumstances, antiviral drugs can be taken before exposure to the flu and prevent illness. This is particularly important for children with serious health problems who haven't had the flu shot. Antibiotics can be used to fight bacterial infections but have no effect on viruses, including flu viruses. Extra rest and lots of fluids also can help your child feel better.

## Caution

Don't give aspirin to your child for the flu. An increased risk of developing Reye syndrome (an illness that can seriously affect the liver and brain) is associated with aspirin use during bouts of the flu.

If your child is uncomfortable because of fever, acetaminophen may help him feel better. Check first with your pediatrician before giving your child any other medicines, including over-the-counter cold and cough medicines.

## Prevention

Good hygiene is the best way to prevent the flu from spreading to other family members. If your child has the flu, the following will help prevent its spread:

- Teach your child to cover her mouth and nose with a tissue or her sleeve, but not with her hands, when coughing or sneezing. If your child is old enough, teach her how to blow her nose properly.
- Use tissues for runny noses and to catch sneezes. Throw them in the trash after each use.
- Avoid kissing your child on or around the mouth or face, though she will need plenty of hugs while she's sick.
- Make sure everyone washes his or her hands before and after coming into close contact with someone with the flu.
- Wash dishes and utensils in hot, soapy water or the dishwasher.
- Don't let children share pacifiers, cups, utensils, washcloths, or towels. Never share toothbrushes.
- Use disposable paper cups in the bathroom and kitchen.
- Disinfect. Viruses can live for more than 30 minutes on doorknobs, toilet handles, countertops, and even toys. Use a disinfectant or soap and hot water to keep these areas clean.
- Don't smoke around your child. Children who are exposed to tobacco smoke cough and wheeze more and have a harder time getting over the flu.

## Flu shot

There are safe and effective vaccines to protect against the flu. They are particularly recommended for children with health problems that make it risky for them to get the flu. This includes children with the following:

- Heart disease
- Lung disease, including asthma
- Immune problems, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection
- Blood diseases
- Cancer
- Chronic kidney disease
- Metabolic diseases, such as diabetes
- Long-term aspirin therapy, such as with rheumatoid arthritis

Healthy children 6-23 months of age are recommended to get a flu shot each fall, as is everyone in the household of a child of this age. Your pediatrician can recommend what's best for your child.

For children younger than 9 years, the vaccine requires 2 immunizations or shots given 1 month apart the first year it's given. After that, only 1 dose is needed each year. The best time to get the flu vaccine is in October to early December before the flu season starts. Vaccination should begin earlier (eg, September) for those needing 2 shots.

Because the strains of flu virus are different every year, a new flu vaccine is developed each year. The vaccine is made from killed flu viruses and helps the immune system fight the flu. Most children are immune within 2 weeks of getting the vaccine. Side effects usually are minor and include soreness at the site of the injection and a low-grade fever. The flu shot can't cause the flu.

### Side effects

Even though there are few side effects from the vaccine, production of the vaccine involves the use of eggs. If your child has had a serious allergic reaction to eggs or egg products, he should be skin tested before getting the vaccine. If skin testing confirms hypersensitivity to eggs, the vaccine usually shouldn't be given.

### Flu or cold?

Both the flu and colds are caused by viruses and share many of the same symptoms, but there are differences. A child with a common cold usually has less of a fever and only mild coughing. Children with the flu usually feel much sicker and achy and are miserable. Also, the flu tends to strike more quickly than a cold. Stomach upsets and vomiting are more common with the flu than with a cold. Children who have colds usually have enough energy to play and keep up with their normal day-to-day routines. The flu, on the other hand, keeps most children in bed for several days.

### When to call your pediatrician

An older child with the flu usually doesn't need to see the pediatrician unless the condition becomes more serious. If your child is 3 months of age or younger, however, call your pediatrician if she has a fever. For a child older than 3 months who has been exposed to the flu, call your pediatrician if your child experiences any of the following:

- Difficulty breathing
- Blue lips or nails
- A cough that just will not go away (for more than 1 week)
- Pain in the ear
- Continued or new onset of fever after 3 to 4 days of illness

If your child seems extremely sick or her condition doesn't improve, call your pediatrician.

### Nasal spray flu vaccine

Scientists have developed a nasal spray flu vaccine. Unlike the flu vaccine given by injection, it's made from living but weakened (attenuated) flu viruses. Live attenuated influenza vaccine (trade name FluMist) is the first live-virus flu vaccine approved in the United States. It's approved only for healthy children 5 years and older and healthy adults aged 18 to 49 years, and shouldn't be given to children who have asthma.

Note: Products are mentioned for informational purposes only and do not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

Please call with any questions or concerns

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