

Influenza

Patient education

What is influenza?

Influenza, more commonly known as the flu, is a contagious respiratory infection caused by the influenza A and B viruses. Influenza spreads easily from person to person and in Ontario, spreads most frequently in the fall and winter months each year.

What causes influenza?

The influenza virus can be spread through:

- Droplets containing the virus releasing into the air when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks, and land on the face, eyes, or mouth of people nearby
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with the virus then touching your mouth, eyes, or nose with unwashed hands

What increases the risks?

Those at an increased risk of developing influenza-related complications include:

- Pregnant people
- People that are 65 years of age and older.
- People from Indigenous communities.
- Children six months of age, to five years of age.
- Adults and children with chronic health conditions, such as obesity, heart or lung diseases, anemia, asthma, diabetes, etc.
- People living in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities.

Those at an increased risk of spreading influenza to people at high risk include:

- Household members that live with people at high risk of developing influenza-related complications.
- People that provide care to children less than five years of age.
- People that provide care services to people at high risk.

How can I avoid getting and spreading Influenza?

- Getting the seasonal flu shot every year. The flu shot is available to everyone six months and older and helps by:
 - Preventing influenza-related complications
 - Reducing the likelihood of spreading the virus to others

- Reducing the chances of being infected with influenza and other respiratory viruses, such as COVID-19, at the same time. It is important to note that the influenza vaccine does not protect you against COVID-19. You should stay up-to-date with all the COVID-19 vaccinations.
- Staying at home and avoiding close contact with others when you are sick
- Practicing good hand hygiene
- Covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze or cough, and washing your hands immediately afterwards
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and shared items that are potentially contaminated
- Trying not to touch your face often

How do I know that I have influenza?

Influenza symptoms vary from person to person and can range from mild to severe. Symptoms often appear between one to four days after exposure to the virus, and may include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle pain and aches
- Headaches
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhea, nausea, and/or vomiting, particularly in children

Additional symptoms to watch out for in children include:

- Not eating or drinking like usual
- Not waking up or interacting with others like usual
- Irritability

Influenza and COVID-19 can cause very similar symptoms, making it hard to diagnose influenza based on symptoms alone. However, health care providers can determine whether you have influenza through laboratory tests on a nose or throat swab.

Possible complications and severe outcomes of influenza may include:

- Pneumonia and respiratory failure
- Ear infections
- Worsening of chronic health conditions
- Hospitalization
- Death

How is influenza treated?

Most people recover from the flu in seven to 10 days. Symptoms can be managed with rest, ample fluids, and over-the-counter cough and flu medications (as advised by your health care provider) to relieve body aches and/or fever.

If you are at a higher risk of developing influenza-related complications or have very severe symptoms, your health care provider may prescribe antiviral medications to help reduce the severity and duration of illness. If you develop influenza-related complications, you may require medical care in a hospital.

If you have been diagnosed with influenza, please contact your doctor or health care provider immediately if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Fever
- Diarrhea
- Chest pain
- Worsening cough
- More mucus production
- Nausea or vomiting

If you have been diagnosed with influenza, please get help immediately if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Severe pain or stiffness in your neck
- You cannot eat or drink without vomiting
- Blue-coloured skin or nails
- Sudden pain in your face or ear
- Sudden headache
- In children: fever (temperature equal to or greater than 38°C)

Where can I get more information?

About Influenza: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/flu-influenza.html>

References:

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2020, October 19). *Flu (influenza): Symptoms and treatment*. Canada.ca. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/flu-influenza.html>

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Key facts about Influenza (FLU). (2023, May 2). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/keyfacts.htm>