

Preparing You for Emergencies: The Flu

Q: What is the flu?

The flu, or influenza, is a respiratory illness caused by viruses that spread from person-to-person by droplets from coughing or sneezing. It usually spreads from close person-to-person contact, though sometimes people become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth, eyes or nose. The virus can live for hours on high-touch surfaces like doorknobs, desks and tables.

Healthy adults who become infected with the flu virus, may be contagious beginning one day **before** symptoms develop and up to five days **after** becoming sick. That means that you can pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

Q: What are the symptoms of the flu?

Symptoms of the flu, or influenza, are:

- Fever (up to 104 degrees) with sweating and/or chills
- Headache, muscle aches and/or stiffness
- Shortness of breath
- Vomiting and nausea (in children)
- Illness lasting for 5-7 days

A cold and flu are alike in many ways therefore many people confuse these illnesses. A stuffy nose, sore throat and sneezing are usually signs of a cold.

The following table can help you determine whether symptoms are more likely to indicate a cold or the flu:

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	Up to 104 degrees, lasts 3-4 days
Headache	Rare	Prominent
General aches/pains	Slight	Usual, often severe
Fatigue, weakness	Quite Mild	Can last up to 2-3 weeks
Nasal congestion	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes
Chest Discomfort, cough	Mild to moderate	Can become severe

Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea without the fever, cough, aching and respiratory symptoms is actually gastroenteritis, but some people call it "stomach flu." This form is caused by other bacteria or viruses and not by the influenza virus.

Q: What is Avian flu?

Avian influenza, also called "bird flu" is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These influenza viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, avian influenza is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, very sick and kill them.

The risk from avian influenza is generally low to most people, because the viruses do not usually infect humans. However, confirmed cases of human infection from several subtypes of avian influenza infection have been reported since 1997. Most cases of avian influenza infection in humans have resulted from contact with infected poultry (e.g., domesticated chickens, ducks, and turkeys) or surfaces contaminated with secretion/excretions from infected birds.

As of today, a few episodes of person-to-person infection have been reported. However, as with other viruses, scientists are concerned that the avian flu virus may mutate so that it can easily be passed from person to person. Avian flu virus has not been found in the U.S. population and efforts are underway to protect poultry supplied to the U.S. food industry from infection.

Q: What is Seasonal flu?

Every year, usually between December and May, 5% to 20% of the population in the U.S. becomes ill with influenza. This is the normal course of **seasonal flu**, which can cause serious illness and even death in the very young, the elderly and other individuals with impaired resistance and chronic illnesses. This is why public health professionals and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issue bulletins every fall advising at-risk groups and the general population about flu vaccinations.

Q: What is a Flu Pandemic?

A pandemic is defined as an infection that involves a virus or bacteria to which few people have immunity, can be transmitted from person to person and that impacts more than one country. HIV is one example of a pandemic.

In 1918, 1957 and 1968 the flu season in the U.S. was especially severe, and resulted in a much higher number of illnesses and deaths. This more dangerous form is called **pandemic flu**. Public health experts believe that a flu pandemic is likely to occur again in the future.

Q: How can you protect yourself from the flu?

- *Get a flu shot*

When you get vaccinated, it reduces your chances of getting seasonal flu. Since the flu season can last through May, even January is not too late to get a flu shot; however, it takes two weeks after the shot to develop immunity. Remember, the flu shot does not cause the flu.

- *Wash your hands or use an antibacterial hand cleaner*

One of the easiest and most effective things you can do to protect yourself from the flu is to keep your hands clean. Wash your hands by rubbing them together with soap and water or use a waterless hand cleaner. Make hand washing a habit and encourage others in your workplace to do the same. See the December Special Issue of [Preparing You for Emergencies.](#)

When soap and water are not available, use a waterless antibacterial hand cleaner. Choose alcohol hand rubs with 60 - 95% alcohol (usually listed as isopropyl, ethanol or propanol). Read the directions and use the hand rub appropriately. Never wipe the hand rub off; allow your hands to air dry. When used properly, these sanitizers reduce the transmission of disease-causing germs very effectively.

- *Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth*
- *Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when sneezing*
- *Stay away from others if you are sick; don't go to class or work if you are running a fever*
- *Avoid close contact with people who are sick*
- *Cough into your sleeve instead of your hands to minimize hand contamination*

Q: What should you do if you get the flu?

If you develop symptoms of the flu, contact your health-care provider. There may be medications to relieve your symptoms. Get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids and avoid using alcohol and tobacco.

The flu can be debilitating, causing the person who is ill to be bedridden for extended periods. Be alert to the well being of your friends, relatives and co-workers. Those with the flu may need assistance in getting medical attention and care.

If you are at special risk from complications of flu, you should consult your health care provider immediately upon recognizing flu symptoms. Those at risk include people 65 years or older, people with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women and children.

Q: What are U of L's Emergency Plans for pandemic flu?

The University of Louisville has taken several measures to prepare the campus in the event of a severe or pandemic flu outbreak.

- U of L has an all-hazard Emergency Plan that details responsibilities, chain of command and response actions.
- U of L is providing flu prevention information to students, faculty and staff, including use of this web site.
- U of L is working with the Louisville Metro Health Department to make sure our preparations and plans are coordinated with theirs. In an outbreak or pandemic, the health department has authority to direct public health actions, including quarantine.
- U of L has formed an Emerging Disease Planning Group that is composed of campus experts and key response departments to conduct pre-event planning and prepare specific pandemic flu response procedures.
- U of L is developing procedures and plans for supporting ill students who reside on campus, should it become necessary.