

# Influenza

## What is it?

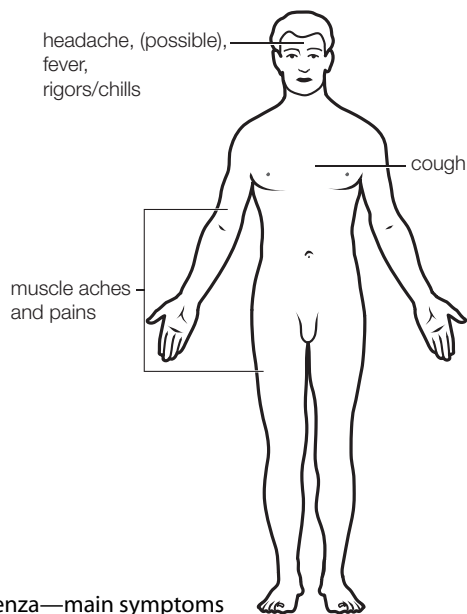
*Influenza*, usually called *flu*, is a respiratory infection caused by a virus, which is a tiny germ that cannot be seen even under an ordinary microscope. There are several kinds of influenza virus, and they seem to keep changing just when we seem to be immune to them. However, they all produce a similar illness.

## What are the symptoms?

The diagnosis of influenza is made on the presence of 6 of the following 8 criteria during an influenza epidemic:

- sudden onset (less than 12 hours)
- fever
- dry cough
- rigors or chills
- muscle aches and pains
- prostration or weakness
- absence of upper respiratory signs
- influenza in close contacts.

These may be followed by a sore throat, a headache, a runny nose and sneezing.



Influenza—main symptoms

## How is it caught?

Influenza usually comes in epidemics, when it spreads from one person to another in the spray from coughs and sneezes (called *droplet infection*). The virus enters the nose or throat and may spread to the lungs. It is extremely infectious.

## How is it different from the common cold?

Many people refer to the common cold (which is more common) as 'the flu,' but influenza is a more serious respiratory infection that usually makes the victim sick enough to go to bed. Flu tends to go to the chest and makes the whole body ache; the common cold usually only affects the upper respiratory passages, causing a runny nose, sneezing and a sore throat.

## What are the risks?

The main risk of influenza is that the infection may spread to the lungs, causing bronchitis or, worse still, pneumonia. Such complications are uncommon, and are more likely to occur in people with poor nutrition and health (especially those with a chest complaint), in the elderly and in heavy smokers.

Although influenza makes people quite ill, it is usually not dangerous. However, new strains such as avian (bird) flu can emerge from time to time and cause lethal pneumonia. Feeling depressed after the flu is a common problem.

## What is the treatment?

Like any viral infection, influenza must run its course. Symptoms can be eased and complications prevented by proper care and common sense in addition to anti-viral drugs (severe cases). Report any worrying developments to your doctor (or hospital) immediately.

## Self-help

- *Rest.* Just as a broken leg needs rest, so does the body overcome by flu. Go to bed as soon as the symptoms begin and stay there until you feel better and the fever goes away.
- *Analgesics.* Pain-killers such as codeine compound tablets are more effective than aspirin at relieving symptoms, especially cough and aching. However, the choice is an individual preference as some people respond well to aspirin (adults only) or paracetamol alone. Make sure you are not allergic to the particular analgesic.
- *Fluids.* You lose a lot of body fluid, especially with a fever, so drink as much water and fruit juice as possible (at least 8 glasses a day).
- *Special remedies.* Any remedy that makes you feel comfortable is good. Freshly squeezed lemon juice mixed with honey is very good. Some people find a nip of brandy or whisky with the fruit juice soothing.

The flu will usually last 3 to 4 days, sometimes longer. Consult your doctor only if you are concerned about complications. Your doctor may prescribe one of the new anti-influenza drugs such as zanamivir (Relenza) and oseltamivir (Tamiflu). Routine antibiotics are not helpful—they are reserved for complications. Some people find that taking 1 to 2 grams of vitamin C each day helps recovery.

## What about prevention?

The influenza vaccine appears to help some people, but vaccination cannot guarantee total immunity as the strain that sets off the epidemic may be new. Vaccination is worthwhile for patients at risk: diabetics, those with chronic lung disease and heart disease, those over 65 years, and those whose occupation (working with crowds or sick patients) puts them at risk in an epidemic.