



Patient Guide: Seasonal Influenza

We care about your health. Influenza (“the flu”) can impact your health in various ways. This handout provides information about the flu and the methods used to reduce the spread of viruses that cause flu.

How the flu Spreads

Flu viruses are thought to spread from person to person mainly through airborne droplets. When a person with the flu sneezes or coughs, droplets are spread through the air and can reach the mouth or nose of others. Flu viruses can also be spread when a person touches these droplets on another person or object (such as a table or chair), and then touches their own nose or mouth.

Symptoms of the Flu

The flu is a viral infection and can be mild or severe. Symptoms may include: fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea may also be present. Although the flu is caused by a virus, secondary bacterial infections such as ear infections, sinus infections, and pneumonia may occur, especially in people with other illnesses and chronic medical conditions.

Preventive Measures

We use a variety of methods to assist in preventing the spread of infections. We offer and encourage our Veterans and employees to get an annual influenza vaccination. We require that our employees practice hand hygiene before and after caring for patients. Alcohol based hand cleansers are available to staff, visitors, and patients all over the hospital. We also have tissues and face masks available to prevent airborne droplets from being spread into the air and on nearby surfaces. We clean the healthcare environment and equipment with chemicals that kill germs that are harmful.

Treatment for the Flu

The best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccination every year. Millions of people in the United States will get the flu each year and most recover in a few days to 2 weeks. Most healthy people recover from the flu without problems. Antiviral medicines are sometimes used. You can discuss taking antiviral medicine with your doctor.

If you get the flu:

- Stay home from work or school.
- Get lots of rest, drink plenty of liquids, and avoid using alcohol and tobacco.
- There are over-the-counter (OTC) medications to relieve the symptoms of the flu (but never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms, particularly fever).
- Serious illness from the flu is more likely in certain groups of people including people age 65 and older, pregnant women, people with certain chronic medical conditions, and young children.
- Consult your doctor early on for the best treatment, but also be aware of warning signs that require urgent medical attention.

Seek emergency medical care if you or someone you know is having any of following warning signs discussed below.

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Clean your hands

Cleaning your hands is the most important thing that you can do to prevent illness. Some scientists estimate that 80% of infections can be prevented by proper hand hygiene. Hands should be cleaned before touching, or eating food and try to keep from touching your face.

You should use soap and water when hands are visibly soiled or after you use the restroom, or before eating or touching food.

To clean your hands with soap and water:

- Wet hands with warm water.
- Apply soap and rub together for at least 15 seconds.
- Make sure you rub your palms, fingernails, in between fingers, and the backs of your hands.
- Rinse and dry.
- If you are in a public restroom, use a clean paper towel to turn the water off.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are another great way to clean your hands. Use them when your hands do not look dirty.

- Rub sanitizer all over your hands, under your nails and between your fingers until your hands are dry.

Make sure health care providers clean their hands

Doctors, nurses, dentists and other health care providers come into contact with lots of bacteria and viruses. So before they treat you, ask them to clean their hands.

Health care providers should wear gloves when they perform tasks such as taking throat cultures, pulling teeth, taking blood, touching wounds or body fluids, and examining your mouth. It's okay to ask your health care provider to wash their hands and ask if they should wear gloves.

Cover your mouth and nose

Many diseases are spread through sneezes and coughs. When you sneeze or cough, germs can travel 3 feet or more! Cover your mouth and nose to prevent the spread of infection to others.

- Use a tissue. Keep tissues handy at home, at work and in your pocket. Be sure to throw away used tissues and clean your hands after coughing.
- If you don't have a tissue, cover your mouth and nose with the bend of your elbow or hands. If you sneeze into your hands, clean them right away.
- If you are sick, avoid close contact with others.
- If you are sick, stay away from other people or stay at home. Don't shake hands or touch others.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.