

# Kent County Health Department Influenza Fact Sheet



## What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza is a contagious respiratory disease. It is caused by a virus that attacks the nose, throat, and lungs. It can be prevented by immunization. Influenza is **not** the “stomach flu”.

## How does the flu spread?

The flu can be spread:

- Person to person from coughing and sneezing
- By touching objects with flu viruses on them and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth

## What are the symptoms of flu?

Symptoms come quickly and can include:

- Fever \*/or feeling feverish/chills
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Body aches
- Runny or stuffy nose

These symptoms can be severe. They may require you to stay in bed for several days.

\*It is important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.

## How soon will you get sick if you are exposed to the flu?

The time from when a person is exposed to a flu virus to when symptoms begin is about one to four days with an average of about two days.

## How long is a person with the flu contagious?

Most healthy adults might be able to infect others beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five to seven days after becoming sick. Some children may pass the virus for longer than seven days. That means you may be able to pass the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

## How is the flu different from a cold?

Colds and flu are both respiratory illnesses but are caused by different viruses. Since they have similar symptoms, it can be hard to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. In general, the flu is worse than a cold and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose.

## When is the flu season in the United States?

Flu season runs from October through April, and flu activity typically peaks anywhere from late December through March. The severity (the number of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths) of a flu season varies from year to year.

## How can you protect yourself and others against the flu?

- **The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu shot each fall.**
- Wash your hands often – with soap and water, or with an alcohol-based, waterless hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Stay home from school or work if you have a respiratory infection.
- Avoid exposure to others who are sick with a flu-like illness.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue whenever you cough or sneeze. Then throw away the tissue.
- If you do not have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve.
- Avoid putting your baby in close contact (holding, kissing) with family members who may have the flu (fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough) or other respiratory infections.
- Do not share anything that goes into the mouth (drinking cups and straws).
- Clean commonly touched surfaces (door knobs, refrigerator handle, phone, water

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faucets) often if someone in the house has a cold or the flu.

- Do not smoke around children.

Who should get a flu shot?

**Everyone 6 months and older should get a flu shot.**

It is especially important that the following groups get vaccinated either because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for someone at risk for developing flu-related complications:

- Children younger than 5 years, but especially those 6 months to 2 years
- Adults aged 50 years and older
- Children and adults with:
  - Heart disease
  - Lung disease including asthma
  - Diabetes
  - A weakened immune system
  - Blood disorders
- Pregnant women
- Children aged 6 months to 18 years on chronic aspirin therapy
- Residents of nursing homes and long-term care facilities
- Health care workers involved with direct patient care
- Household contacts and out-of-home caregivers of children younger than 5 years of age with special emphasis on contacts of children younger than 6 months of age

What if you think you or your child has the flu?

- **Stay home if you are ill and encourage others to do so as well.**
- Rest and drink lots of fluids. This will help your body recover from the infection.
- Take medication such as acetaminophen to relieve the symptoms (but never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms – particularly fever – without talking to your doctor).

- Since the flu is caused by a virus and not by bacteria, antibiotics will not help a person recover from the flu. Anti-viral medicine is an option for some but not all.
- Call your doctor or clinic about what to do if you are concerned.
- Follow your child's doctor's instructions about keeping his or her fever under control.
- Take your child to the doctor or the emergency room if he or she:
  - Is breathing quickly or with difficulty
  - Has bluish skin color
  - Is not drinking enough and becomes dehydrated
  - Is not waking up or interacting with others
  - Is so irritable that he or she doesn't want to be held
  - Gets better only to become sick again, with fever and a more severe cough
- If you are concerned that something does not seem right with your child, call his or her doctor.

What about anti-viral medications?

Anti-viral medications fight against the flu in your body. They are available only by prescription. There are risks in taking them and some people may have serious side effects.

**Most healthy people with the flu do not need to be treated with anti-viral medications.** They should be used to treat people who are very sick with the flu (those in the hospital) or have a greater chance of getting serious flu complications.

If taken within the appropriate time frame (usually within two days of getting sick), anti-viral medications can shorten the time a person is sick and prevent more serious flu complications. However, they are not a cure. Talk to your health care provider if you have questions.