

Influenza / 'Flu'

What is influenza?

Influenza or 'flu' is a viral infection that mainly affects the nose, throat and lungs. There are two main types of 'flu' that cause infection: influenza A and influenza B. Influenza A is usually a more severe infection than influenza B.

Influenza usually starts suddenly with a high fever over 38.0°C (100°F) which can last for three to four days. A dry cough, headaches and chills are common as are general muscle aches and pains. A stuffy nose, sneezing and a sore throat can also be present. The fever tends to decrease after the second day when a stuffy nose and a sore throat become more noticeable. Some people may also feel sick (nausea), or have diarrhoea. Tiredness can last two to three weeks.

Influenza is worse than an ordinary cold. A cold is often limited to a runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation and the symptoms usually occur gradually and do not cause a fever or body aches.

A gastrointestinal infection (gastric 'flu') is caused by another virus, usually norovirus or rotavirus.

Who catches influenza?

Anyone can catch 'flu'; the highest rates of infection are usually in school age children. Most influenza infections occur during the winter months. The severity of illness occurring each year varies, depending on the particular strain that is circulating. Some influenza viruses cause more severe illness than others. Therefore in some winters people may feel more unwell with 'flu' than in other years.

How do you catch influenza?

For the most part, influenza is caught by breathing in air containing the virus after an infected person coughs or sneezes, or by touching a surface where the virus has landed and then touching your mouth or nose.

How infectious is influenza?

Influenza is very infectious and can spread rapidly from person to person. Some strains of the virus are more infectious than others and some can cause more severe illness.

How serious is influenza?

Most people recover completely from influenza in a matter of days or a week. Serious illness from influenza is very rare. It can be caused either by the virus itself causing a severe viral pneumonia (inflammation of the lungs, usually caused by an infection), or by triggering a bacterial infection causing bronchitis and pneumonia, or a worsening of any underlying chronic medical condition such as heart disease. It is important to remember that this does not always happen, but medical advice must be sought if your symptoms worsen and you are in the above group of patients.

What should I do if I get influenza?

Rest at home, drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration and take painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen for pain or high temperature. Do not take paracetamol and flu remedies that both contain paracetamol at the same time as it's easy to take more than the recommended dose. If you are generally healthy, most 'flu-like' illnesses caused either by 'flu' or other viruses will be short lived and need no specific treatment or hospital admission. Children 15 years and under should not take medicines which contain aspirin, unless advised to do so by a doctor.

A pharmacist can give treatment advice and recommend 'flu' remedies.

Medical advice should be sought from your GP or NHS 111 if symptoms become severe or last more than about a week. Those at higher risk (see below) may need to seek help sooner.

Who is most at higher risk from the complications of influenza?

- The very young – babies
- People over 65 years
- Pregnant women
- Patients with a long-term medical condition – for example, diabetes or a condition that affects their heart, lungs, kidneys, brain or nerves
- Patients who have a weakened immune system e.g. because of chemotherapy or HIV

Some of the patients in these higher risk groups may be offered antiviral medications e.g. Oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and Zanamivir (Relenza) against the 'flu' virus.

How can I reduce the spread of the virus?

It is important if someone has a respiratory infection that they cover their nose and mouth, preferably with a tissue, when they cough and sneeze and wash their hands straight afterwards. Used tissues should be disposed of immediately after use. Normal household disinfection products, such as bleach, can be used to clean the room of someone who has 'flu', as the virus can easily be destroyed.

The incubation period – the period between infection and the appearance of symptoms – is about two to three days. Although the virus is present before symptoms appear, adults are usually considered infectious once symptoms appear and for 3-5 days afterwards. This period is longer in children.

What precautions should people take?

The 'flu' vaccine helps protect against 'flu'. It's safe and effective. It is offered on the NHS every year in autumn or early winter to some adults and children at higher risk of getting seriously ill from flu.

Does the vaccine have any side effects?

'Flu' vaccines are very safe. They may cause some soreness where you were injected and, less often, a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days. The vaccine cannot cause 'flu' because it does not contain live virus.

Acknowledgements:

Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust https://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/media/iwzalby/seasonal-influenza-flu_nov24.pdf
Papworth Hospital NHS foundation Trust <https://royalpapworth.nhs.uk/application/files/5916/6843/2775/PI-93-Influenza.pdf>
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/flu/>

If you need further advice, please contact the Emergency Department, details below
Patient Experience

We know that being admitted to hospital can be a difficult and unsettling time for you and your loved ones. If you have any questions or concerns, please do speak with a member of staff on the ward or in the relevant department who will do their best to answer your questions and reassure you.

Feedback

Feedback is really important and useful to us – it can tell us where we are working well and where improvements can be made. There are lots of ways you can share your experience with us including completing our Friends and Family Test – cards are available and can be posted on all wards, departments and clinics at our hospitals. We value your comments and feedback and thank you for taking the time to share this with us.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have any concerns or questions about your care, we advise you to talk with the nurse in charge or the department manager in the first instance as they are best placed to answer any questions or resolve concerns quickly. If the relevant member of staff is unable to help resolve your concern, you can contact the PALS Team. We offer informal help, advice or support about any aspect of hospital services & experiences.

Our PALS team will liaise with the various departments in our hospitals on your behalf, if you feel unable to do so, to resolve your problems and where appropriate refer to outside help.

If you are still unhappy you can contact the Complaints Department, who can investigate your concerns. You can make a complaint orally, electronically or in writing and we can advise and guide you through the complaints procedure.

How to contact PALS:

Telephone Patient Services: 0300 123 1732 or via email at: wah-tr.PALS@nhs.net

Opening times:

The PALS telephone lines are open Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 4.00pm. Please be aware that you may need to leave a voicemail message, but we aim to return your call within one working day.

If you are unable to understand this leaflet, please communicate with a member of staff.

For additional medical advice, if your symptoms or condition worsens:

Contact your GP

NHS 111:

Get help with your symptoms, NHS111:
Information to help you manage your health:

Telephone 111

<https://111.nhs.uk/>
www.nhs.uk

In an emergency telephone 999

Emergency Department (A&E)
Alexandra Hospital
Woodrow Drive
Redditch B98 7UB

Tel: 01527 512030

Minor Injury Unit
Kidderminster Hospital
Bewdley Road
Kidderminster DY11 6RJ

Tel: 01562 513039

Emergency Department (A&E)
Worcestershire Royal Hospital
Charles Hastings Way
Worcester WR5 1DD

Tel: 01905 760743