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Patient information: Influenza symptoms and treatment (Beyond the Basics)

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INTRODUCTION

Influenza (commonly called the flu) is a highly contagious illness that can occur in children or adults of any age. It occurs more often in the winter months because people spend more time in close contact with one another. The flu is spread easily from person-to-person by coughing, sneezing, or touching surfaces.

Every year, complications of the flu require more than 200,000 people in the United States to be hospitalized. Serious illness is more likely in the very young, older adults, pregnant women, and people who have certain health problems such as asthma or other forms of lung disease.

There have been several widespread flu outbreaks (called pandemics), which led to the deaths of many people worldwide. These outbreaks occurred when new strains of influenza viruses formed (often from pigs or birds) and humans became infected because they had no immunity to these viruses.

This article discusses the symptoms and treatment of seasonal, swine H1N1, and avian flu. Treatments to prevent the flu, including the flu shot, are discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Influenza prevention \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

FLU SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of seasonal flu can vary from person to person, but usually include:

- Fever (temperature higher than 100°F or 37.8°C)
- Headache and muscle aches
- Fatigue
- Cough and sore throat may also be present

People with the flu usually have a fever for two to five days. This is different than fever caused by other upper respiratory viruses, which usually resolve after 24 to 48 hours.

Most people with the flu have fever and muscle aches, and some people also have cold-like symptoms (runny nose, sore throat). Flu symptoms usually improve over two to five days, although the illness may last for a week or more. Weakness and fatigue may persist for several weeks ([table 1](#)).

Flu complications — Complications of influenza occur in some people; pneumonia is the most common complication. Pneumonia is a serious infection of the lungs, and is more likely to occur in young children, people over the age of 65, people who live in long term care facilities (nursing homes), and those with

other illnesses such as diabetes or conditions affecting the heart or lungs. Pneumonia is also more common in people with weakened immune systems, such as those who have had a transplant. (See "[Patient information: Pneumonia in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

FLU DIAGNOSIS

Influenza is usually diagnosed based on symptoms (fever, cough and muscle aches). Lab testing for influenza is performed in certain cases, such as during a new influenza outbreak in a community and in patients who are at increased risk for complications.

FLU TREATMENT

When to seek help — Most people with the flu recover within one to two weeks without treatment. However, serious complications of the flu can occur. Call your doctor or nurse immediately if:

- You feel short of breath or have trouble breathing
- You have pain or pressure in your chest or stomach
- You have signs of being dehydrated, such as dizziness when standing or not passing urine
- You feel confused
- You cannot stop vomiting or you cannot drink enough fluids

In children, you should seek help if the child has any of the above or if the child:

- Has blue or purplish skin color
- Is so irritable that he or she does not want to be held
- Does not have tears when crying (in infants)
- Has a fever with a rash
- Does not wake up easily

There are several groups of people who are at increased risk for flu complications. These include pregnant women, young children (<5 years of age, and especially <2 years of age), people ≥65 years of age, and people with certain diseases such as chronic lung disease (such as asthma), heart disease, diabetes, immunosuppressing conditions (such as HIV infection or transplantation), and some other diseases. If you or your child has flu symptoms and is at increased risk for flu complications, you should call your healthcare provider.

Treat symptoms — Treating the symptoms of influenza can help you to feel better, but will not make the flu go away faster.

- Rest until the flu is fully resolved, especially if the illness has been severe
- Fluids — Drink enough fluids so that you do not become dehydrated. One way to judge if you are drinking enough is to look at the color of your urine. Normally, urine should be light yellow to nearly colorless. If you are drinking enough, you should pass urine every three to five hours.
- Acetaminophen (such as Tylenol® and other brands) can relieve fever, headache, and muscle aches. Aspirin, and medicines that include aspirin (eg, bismuth subsalicylate; PeptoBismol), are not recommended for children under 18 because aspirin can lead to a serious disease called Reye syndrome.

