



Jeb Bush
Governor

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Secretary, Department of Health

PINELLAS COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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It's National Influenza Immunization Week

Influenza: What You Need to Know

Influenza, also known as the flu, is a very contagious disease that is caused by the influenza virus. It attacks the respiratory tract in humans (nose, throat and lungs). The flu is different from a cold. **The best way to prevent the flu is to get an influenza vaccine (flu shot).** Influenza usually comes on suddenly and may include these symptoms:

- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness (can be extreme)
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Nasal congestion
- Body aches

These symptoms are usually referred to as "flu-like symptoms."

Anyone can get the flu, but the disease is more severe for some people

Millions of people in the United States (5% to 20% of U.S. residents) get influenza each year. An average of about 36,000 people per year in the U.S. die from influenza, and more than 200,000 have to be admitted to the hospital as a result of influenza. Most people who get influenza will recover in one to two weeks, but some people will develop life threatening complications (such as pneumonia) as a result of the flu.

Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people), and serious problems from influenza can happen at any age. People age 65 years and older, people of any age with chronic medical conditions and very young children are more likely to get complications from influenza. Pneumonia, bronchitis and sinus and ear infections are three examples of complications from flu.

The flu can make chronic health problems worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks while they have the flu, and people with chronic congestive heart failure may have worsening of this condition that is triggered by the flu.

Flu season

In the Northern hemisphere, winter is the time for flu. In the U.S., flu season can range from November through March, and even past March in some years. During the past 21 flu seasons, months with the heaviest flu activity (peak months) occurred in December (four years), January (five years), February (nine years) and March (three years).

How the influenza virus spreads

The main way that influenza viruses spread is from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled (generally up to three feet) through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby.

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The virus also can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

The flu is extremely contagious

You can spread the flu starting one day before you feel sick, and can continue to pass the flu virus to others for another three to seven days after symptoms start. Children can pass the virus for longer than seven days. Symptoms start one to four days after the virus enters the body. Some persons can be infected with the flu virus but have no symptoms. During this time, infected persons can still spread the virus to others. ***If you have the flu, stay at home.***

How to know if you have the flu

Your respiratory illness might be the flu, and not a cold, if you have sudden onset of body aches, fever and respiratory symptoms, and if your illness occurs during November through April (the usual flu season in the Northern Hemisphere). However, other respiratory illnesses can cause similar symptoms – and flu can be caught at any time of the year. It is impossible to tell for sure if you have the flu based on symptoms alone. Doctors can perform tests to see if you have the flu if you are in the first few days of your illness.

What you should do if you get the flu

- Rest;
- Drink plenty of healthy liquids;
- ***Stay at home – do not go to work or school;***
- Avoid using alcohol and tobacco; and
- Take medication to relieve the *symptoms* of flu.

Since influenza is caused by a virus, antibiotics (like penicillin) don't work to cure it.

Never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms – and particularly fever – without first speaking to your doctor. Giving aspirin to children and teenagers who have influenza can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome. Children or teenagers with the flu should get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids and take medicines that contain no aspirin to relieve symptoms.

The myth of the "stomach flu"

Many people use the term "stomach flu" to describe illnesses with nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. These symptoms can be caused by many different viruses, bacteria or even parasites. While vomiting, diarrhea and being nauseous or "sick to your stomach" can sometimes be *related* to the flu, these problems are rarely the main symptoms of influenza. Remember, the flu is a *respiratory* disease and not a stomach or intestinal disease.

Flu shots are available at all five Pinellas County Health Department Health Centers. You may also get a flu shot at your doctor's office, or visit www.findaflushot.com to locate a store-based clinic near you.

For more information, contact your healthcare provider, county health department or visit www.cdc.gov/flu

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The mission of the Pinellas County Health Department is to promote, protect and improve the health and safety of our community through public and private partnerships in an environment that respects diversity. www.PinellasHealth.com