

Flu Facts

by Dr. Delia Chiaramonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Have you ever been in bed with the “flu”? People throw that word around lightly, using it to describe various symptoms from sniffles to cough to diarrhea. But the real flu packs a punch. If you’ve ever had it you would know - it feels like you’ve been run over by a bus. Your body aches so much that you’d rather be at work than moaning and coughing on the couch.

The flu is caused by a virus known as influenza. For most people it is an unpleasant but self-limiting illness, although for more vulnerable populations it can lead to hospitalization or even death. In the United States, an average of 5%-20% of the population gets the flu every year. According to the Centers for Disease Control more than 200,000 people are hospitalized and 36,000 people die each year from influenza. In general it is the very young, the very old and those with other serious health conditions who get the most serious flu-related illnesses, although some healthier people succumb as well.

Influenza is contagious and is spread by respiratory droplets. If someone who looks feverish and achy at this time of year sneezes in your direction, be sure to turn your head. The droplets can also land on door knobs, counter tops and other objects so frequent hand-washing is a good idea during flu season. And never pick your nose without washing your hands first!

The symptoms of flu include high fever, headache, extreme fatigue, cough, muscle aches, runny nose and sore throat. The muscle aches, extreme fatigue and high fever (in adults) help to distinguish it from the common cold.

The single best way to avoid the flu is to get a flu vaccination every year. There are two forms now: the standard shot and a mist that gets sprayed up your nose. The shot is a killed virus, which means that you cannot get the flu from the shot. The nose spray is a weakened live virus that is suitable for most, but not all, people. You will develop protective antibodies approximately 2 weeks after getting the vaccine. The nose spray should not be used by people with immune deficiencies or their close contacts. So if there is someone in your house getting chemotherapy, stick with the shot.

Now is the time to get vaccinated. The flu can show up as early as October, but January is more common. So some time between now and December, get yourself to your doctor or pharmacist and get protected!

Anyone who wants to prevent the flu can get vaccinated, but the vaccine is specifically recommended for the highest risk groups. These include ALL children ages 6 months to 19 years old. Yes, all children over 6 months should have a flu shot according to the CDC. Other high risk groups include pregnant women, people over 50, anyone with a chronic medical condition such as asthma or diabetes, and anyone caring for an infant less than 6 months of age. In addition, anyone living with a person at high risk should be vaccinated. That means if you live with a child you should be vaccinated to decrease the chance that the child will get the flu.

Who shouldn't get the vaccine? People who have had a bad reaction in the past, of course, but also those with egg allergy and children less than 6 months old.

The flu is a potentially deadly disease that is easy to prevent, or at least attenuate. Just do it – get vaccinated.

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