

MONROE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

DISEASE CONTROL UNIT 753-5164

Influenza (Flu)

What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza or flu is an acute viral infection of the respiratory tract. There are three main types of virus: A, B and C. Each type includes many different strains. From year to year the type and strains that cause illness tend to change. Type A is usually the most common cause of illness in the USA.

When does influenza occur?

Influenza occurs most often in the winter months in the USA. Epidemics of influenza occur in the USA almost every year.

Who gets influenza?

Anyone can get influenza, but it is most serious in the elderly, in people with chronic underlying illnesses (such as cancer, emphysema or diabetes) or those with weak immune systems.

How is it spread?

Influenza is highly contagious. It is easily transmitted through airborne spread and through close contact with infected persons.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Typical flu symptoms include headache, fever, chills, body aches, cough, and runny nose. Intestinal symptoms are uncommon. Although most people are ill for only a few days, some people develop a much more serious illness, such as pneumonia, and may need to be hospitalized. Approximately 20,000 people die each year in the United States from the flu or related complications.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

The incubation period for influenza is one to four days.

How is influenza diagnosed?

Usually a doctor will diagnose a case of the flu based on typical symptoms of fever, chills, headache, cough and body aches. There are specific lab tests to confirm the flu: a rapid test that identifies parts of the virus in respiratory secretions and identification of the virus from respiratory secretion by culture.

When and for how long is a person able to spread influenza?

Adults who are sick with flu can be infectious starting the day before symptoms begin and for three to five days after the onset of symptoms; young children are contagious for up to a week.

MONROE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

DISEASE CONTROL UNIT 753-5164

Is there a vaccine for influenza?

Yes. Vaccines are produced every year that generally contain three strains of type A and B influenza that are most likely to cause illness during that year's upcoming flu season. The vaccine is 70 to 80 % effective in healthy young adults. Vaccine effectiveness decreases in the elderly and immunocompromised. However, vaccine may prevent or reduce the severity of disease and incidence of complications in the elderly and immunocompromised.

Vaccine should be given each year before influenza is expected in the community (November to March in the USA) to the following high risk groups:

- all people 65 years of age and older;
- adults and children who have chronic lung and heart conditions (including asthma), diabetes and other metabolic diseases, chronic kidney disease, any condition that causes immune deficiency, or any other chronic medical condition that requires the supervision of a doctor;
- residents of nursing homes and other chronic care facilities that house persons of any age who have chronic medical conditions;
- women who will be in their second or third trimester of pregnancy during the influenza season.
- children and teenagers who receive long-term aspirin therapy and therefore might be at risk for developing Reye syndrome after influenza infection;

Others who should receive vaccine include household contacts of high-risk people and health care workers who provide care to high-risk patients.

Does past infection with influenza make a person immune?

Generally, no. The viruses that cause flu frequently change, so people who have been infected or given flu vaccine in previous years may become infected with a new strain. Immunity produced by the flu shot will possibly decrease in the year after vaccination. People in high-risk groups should be vaccinated every year.

What is the treatment for influenza?

Rest and liquids are important. Prescription antiviral drugs called amantidine and rimantidine may prevent or reduce the severity of influenza type A, but they are not effective against type B. Other drugs are being developed and marketed that may help prevent or minimize flu illness. Persons should consult their doctor about these medications.

What can be done to control or prevent influenza?

- Routine immunization against influenza is the most important control measure.
- Influenza vaccines may be available (flu shot) through your personal physician or local health department.
- Antiviral drugs may be prescribed for certain individuals.
- Because new influenza viruses often appear, the effectiveness of the vaccine sometimes varies from one year to the next. Nevertheless, studies have shown that even in years when new strains emerge, people in high-risk groups who obtain annual flu shots tend to have milder illness and are less likely to be hospitalized with complications.