

Influenza (Flu)

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is Influenza ?

Influenza, also called flu, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by various influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness. In the United States, millions of people are sickened and thousands are hospitalized and die of flu related complications each year.

Preventing Flu

The most important step in preventing flu for you and the community is to get a flu vaccination each year as soon as it becomes available.

- Recommended for everyone 6 months and older according to the CDC
- Get vaccinated before the flu season which is typically November through April
- <http://www.brown.edu/campus-life/health/services> is updated to show where and when **Flu Clinics** will be held at Brown
- The flu vaccine is made with an “inactivated” virus so it does not cause flu (a common myth).

Day-to-day helpful interventions to prevent the flu include covering your mouth when sneezing or coughing, frequent hand washing, and staying away from sick individuals.

Flu Symptoms

Influenza usually comes on suddenly and may include some or all of these symptoms:

- Fever (100.6°F or more) or feeling feverish/chills
- Cough

- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea (more common in children than adults)

Do other viruses circulate during the flu season?

Several other non-flu respiratory viruses also circulate during the flu season including those causing the common cold. Although milder, cold symptoms can often mimic those of the flu. Influenza is different from a common cold, though many people use the term “flu” liberally to describe illnesses with nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. These problems are rarely the main symptoms of influenza.

How Flu Spreads

Flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when infected people cough, sneeze, or even talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby (within 3-6 feet). A person might also get the flu by touching a surface or object that has the flu virus on it, and then, touching their own mouth, eyes, or nose.

Adults are at risk of infecting others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5-7 days after becoming sick. Young children and people with weakened immune systems may be able to infect others or get infected for an even longer time.

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1 to 4 days, with an average of about 2 days.

Flu Complications and People at High Risk

Most people with the flu will recover in a few days. The flu rarely lasts more than two weeks, but some people may develop complications including:

- pneumonia
- bronchitis
- sinus and ear infections
- dehydration

The flu can also make chronic health problems worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks triggered by the flu.

People who are at high risk of developing serious flu-related complications include those:

- With chronic medical conditions (i.e. asthma, diabetes, heart, lung, immunosuppressed)
- On immunosuppressive medication
- Who are pregnant
- 65 years and older
- Younger than 5 years old

These individuals should seek antiviral medication as soon as possible. If you have the flu and are living with someone with the above risk factors, preventative antiviral medicines may be recommended.

Diagnosing Flu during Flu Season

Flu is often diagnosed “clinically” by your provider, just based on your symptoms, especially during peak flu season. At other times, a flu test will be advised, using a swab to sample mucus from the nasopharynx (by inserting a tiny q-tip up one nostril to the top of the throat).

Flu Treatment

Antiviral drugs may be prescribed by a provider.

- Example: Tamiflu
- May lessen the severity of symptoms slightly and shorten the duration by 1-3 days if started within the first 48 hours
- Recommended for individuals at greater risk for complications (see “Flu Complications” list above) in order to prevent serious complications like pneumonia. Even if not started within 48 hours, it can still be helpful
- Side effects: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea

For healthy people, many elect to use symptom relief measures instead:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) and/or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin)
 - Can be taken alone or in an alternating fashion (refer to “Pain & Fever Relief” handout)
 - Reduces fever, and helps with headache, body aches, and sore throat
 - Do NOT take aspirin
- Monitor your temperature at intervals throughout the day, especially before you take fever reducers. Health Services can provide you with disposable thermometers.
- Drink plenty of fluids
 - Water, salty broth, diluted fruit juices, Powerade, vegetable juices, decaffeinated tea, hot water with honey and lemon, Jello, or popsicles
- Salt water gargles to soothe your throat
 - ½ teaspoon salt in 8 ounces of warm water
- Throat or cough lozenges
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and cigarettes
- Sleep and/or rest in bed

Managing Flu on Campus at Brown

Sickness Support

- On the Student Support Dean website select [Sickness Support](#). The Sickness Support form is a google form students can complete to request a Dean's Note for academic flexibility due to illness.

Or

- On the Brown Health Services home page select [Report Illness to Support Deans](#)

For an evaluation or guidance on best treatment, you can call for an appointment with a Health Services provider ((401) 863-3953) when you develop flu symptoms.

Unless necessary for medical care, do not leave your residence until you do not have a fever for 24 hours without fever-reducing medication. You are most likely to spread the infection during this time.

Keep away from others as much as possible, ideally at least 6 ft apart:

- Remain in a room separate from common areas in your residence hall/home
- Keep the door to your room closed
- Use a separate bathroom if possible

Wear a mask if you can't avoid common areas. You can obtain one at Health Services.

Ask those in your household/suite/room to wash their hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Worsening Symptoms

Call 863-1330, 24/7 for advice if you have concerns about symptoms.

Call EMS 863-4111 for Emergency signs of flu including:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Sudden dizziness/confusion
- Severe headache
- Rash
- Stiff neck

How do I get more information on the flu?

For other sources of information, you can go to <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm>

Source: Center for Disease Control; RI Dept of Health