



# MEDIA RELEASE

Bureau of Administration  
7178 Columbia Gateway Drive  
Columbia, MD 21046

**Media Contacts:**

Lisa M. de Hernández  
Public Information Officer  
(410) 313-6353 Office (410) 428-7294 Mobile  
[ldehernandez@howardcountymd.gov](mailto:ldehernandez@howardcountymd.gov)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Parents: Fight the Flu and Watch for Warning Signs

**Columbia, MD** – As a result of the death this week of a Howard County teenager due to influenza, the Howard County Health Department is encouraging citizens to take steps to protect against the flu and to know the warning signs that require urgent medical attention.

Deaths among young people from the flu are extremely rare (CDC reports only nine confirmed pediatric influenza deaths in the U.S. this year) but Health Officer, Dr. Peter Beilenson reminds all County residents it is still advisable to get a flu shot and noted that free flu shots are available at the Howard County Health Department by calling 410-313-7500 (or contact your local Health Department).

“This tragic death is highly unusual. Most people who get the flu recover after a few days, but getting a flu shot and following common hygiene precautions can greatly reduce the risk of contracting the flu” says Dr. Beilenson

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the following steps to protect yourself from the Flu:

- **Get a Flu Shot!** - It is not too late. New recommendations include giving flu shots to children ages 6 months to 18 years and to continue to immunize adults of all ages.
- **Take preventive actions!** –
  - Cover your sneeze or cough. (Use the crook of your elbow!)
  - Wash your hands frequently with soap and water (anti-bacterial hand cleaners work too).
- **Try to avoid contact with sick people** – Stay home from work or school if you are sick.

Influenza usually starts suddenly and may include the following symptoms:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Tiredness (can be extreme)

- more -

# Influenza Fact Sheet

## **Influenza is a viral infection of the lungs and airways that is also known as “the flu”**

Anyone can get influenza. Influenza is spread from person to person through the air by coughing and sneezing. It is also spread by direct contact with infected people. Influenza can be a serious disease that causes severe complications such as pneumonia. It can also make heart disease or chronic lung disease worse. Thousands of deaths each year are caused by influenza.

## **Symptoms of influenza might be confused with the common cold**

Influenza and the common cold both have symptoms that affect the throat and nose, but influenza symptoms are usually more severe than cold symptoms. These symptoms include a stuffy or runny nose, sore throat, and cough. Other symptoms of influenza affect the whole body, such as headache, tiredness, body aches, fever, and chills. Symptoms of influenza usually start 1 to 3 days after coming into contact with an individual who is ill with influenza. Most persons feel better after several days but cough and tiredness may last two weeks or more. Stomach cramps and diarrhea are not typical symptoms of influenza.

## **There are ways to treat influenza**

For the quickest recovery from influenza, get plenty of rest; drink fluids like juice, water, or hot tea; and take an aspirin substitute for muscle aches and fever (but **never** give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms – and particularly fever – without first speaking to your doctor.). **Do not** give any medication including over-the-counter remedies to a child without first consulting with your pediatrician. If a fever lasts more than 3 or 4 days, see a doctor. A doctor can also prescribe certain antiviral medications. These medications may make symptoms milder if taken within 1 to 2 days of when symptoms begin.

## **Look Out for Emergency Warning Signs**

There are some “emergency warning signs” that require urgent medical attention.

**In children**, some emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- High or prolonged fever
- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Changes in mental status, such as not waking up or not interacting; being so irritable that the child does not want to be held; or seizures
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions (for example, heart or lung disease, diabetes)

**In adults**, some emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- High or prolonged fever
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Near-fainting or fainting
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

**Seek medical care immediately**, either by calling your doctor or going to an emergency room, if you or someone you know is experiencing any of the signs described above or other unusually severe symptoms. When you arrive, tell the receptionist or nurse about your symptoms. You may be asked to wear a mask and/or sit in a separate area to protect others from getting sick.

### **Yearly vaccination is the most important way to prevent influenza**

People at higher risk of complications should get the influenza vaccine each year. The best time to get the influenza vaccine is between October and mid-November. It may also be given in September or after mid-November. It takes about 2 weeks after vaccination to develop protection against the influenza virus. Past infection with influenza or immunization with the influenza vaccine does not protect a person from getting influenza the next year.

### **People who should receive influenza vaccination include:**

- Anyone 50 years of age or older
- Anyone with a weakened immune system
- Anyone 6 months to 18 years of age who takes chronic aspirin therapy
- Anyone with a serious long-term health problem such as heart disease, lung disease, or kidney disease
- Anyone living in a nursing home, assisted living facility, or rehabilitation facility
- Pregnant women in the 2nd and 3rd trimester
- Anyone coming in close contact with people at risk of complications (for example, health care workers or family members)

### **Influenza vaccine may rarely cause serious side effects in some people**

The viruses in the vaccine are killed, so you cannot get influenza from the vaccine. People with severe allergic reactions to eggs or to a previous dose of influenza vaccine, and people with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome should talk to their doctor before getting vaccinated.

### **There are steps you can take to prevent spreading influenza to others:**

- Wash hands often, especially after coughing, sneezing, and wiping or blowing the nose.
- Cover mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Use paper tissues when wiping or blowing the nose; throw tissues away after each use.
- Stay away from crowded living and sleeping spaces, if possible.
- Stay home and avoid contact with other people to protect them from catching your illness.
- Certain antiviral medications may prevent illness.

# the flu



## A Guide for Parents

### What is the flu?

The flu (influenza) is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that is caused by influenza virus. The flu can spread from person to person. Most people with flu are sick for about a week, but then feel better. However, some people (especially young children, pregnant women, older people, and people with chronic health problems) can get very sick and some can die.

### What are the symptoms of the flu?

Most people with the flu feel tired and have fever (usually high), headache, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and sore muscles. Some people, especially children, may also have stomach problems and diarrhea. Cough can last two or more weeks.

### How does the flu spread?

People that have the flu usually cough, sneeze, and have a runny nose. This makes droplets with virus in them. Other people can get the flu by breathing in these droplets, getting them in their nose or mouth, or touching contaminated surfaces.

### How long can a sick person spread the flu to others?

Healthy adults may be able to spread the flu from 1 day **before** getting sick to up to 5 days **after** getting sick. This can be longer in children and in people who don't fight disease as well (people with weakened immune systems).

### How can I protect my child from the flu?

A flu vaccine is the best way to protect against the flu. CDC recommends that all children from the ages of 6 months up to their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday get a flu vaccine every fall or winter (children getting a vaccine for the first time need two doses).

- Flu shots can be given to children 6 months and older.
- A nasal-spray vaccine can be given to healthy children 2 years and older (children under 5 years old who have had wheezing in the past year or any child with chronic health problems should get the flu shot).

You can protect your child by getting a flu vaccine for yourself too. Also encourage your child's close contacts to get a flu vaccine. This is very important if your child is younger than 5 or has a chronic health problem like asthma (breathing disease) or diabetes (high blood sugar levels).

### Is there medicine to treat the flu?

There are antiviral drugs for children 1 year and older that can make your child feel better and get better sooner. But these drugs need to be approved by a doctor. They should be started during the first 2 days that your child is sick for them to work best. Your doctor can discuss with you if these drugs are right for your child.

# What Can YOU Do?

**How else can I protect my child against flu?**

1. Take time to get a flu vaccine and get your child vaccinated too.
2. Take everyday steps to prevent the spread of germs. This includes:
  - Clean *your* hands often and cover your coughs and sneezes
  - Tell your child to:
    - Stay away from people who are sick
    - Clean hands often
    - Keep hands away from face
    - Cover coughs and sneezes to protect others (it's best to use a tissue and throw it away).

**What should I use for hand cleaning?**

Washing hands with soap and water (for as long as it takes to sing the *Happy Birthday* song twice) will help protect your child from many different germs. When soap and water are not available, wipes or gels with alcohol in them can be used (the gels should be rubbed into your hands until they are dry).

**What can I do if my child gets sick?**

Consult your doctor and make sure your child gets plenty of rest and drinks a lot of fluids. If your child is older than 2 years, you can buy medicine (over-the-counter) without a prescription that might make your child feel better. Be careful with these medicines and follow the instructions on the package. **But never give aspirin or medicine that has aspirin in it** to children or teenagers who may have the flu.

**What if my child seems very sick?**

- Call or take your child to a doctor right away if your child:
- has a high fever or fever that lasts a long time
  - has trouble breathing or breathes fast
  - has skin that looks blue
  - is not drinking enough
  - seems confused, will not wake up, does not want to be held, or has seizures (uncontrolled shaking)
  - gets better but then worse again
  - has other conditions (like heart or lung disease, diabetes) that get worse

**Can my child go to school if he or she is sick?**

No. Your child should stay home to rest and to avoid giving the flu to other children.

**Should my child go to school if other children are sick?**

It is not unusual for some children in school to get sick during the winter months. If many children get sick, it is up to you to decide whether to send your child to school. You might want to check with your doctor, especially if your child has other health problems.

**When can my child go back to school after having the flu?**

Keep your child home from school until his or her temperature has been normal for 24 hours. Remind your child to cover their mouth when coughing or sneezing, to protect others (you may want to send some tissue and wipes or gels with alcohol in them to school with your child).

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- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body aches
- Diarrhea and vomiting (more common among children than adults)

For the quickest recovery from influenza, get plenty of rest; drink fluids like juice, water, or hot tea; and take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for muscle aches and fever (**never** give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms). **Do not** give any medication including over-the-counter remedies to a child without first consulting with your pediatrician.

There are several emergency warning signs of the flu that require **urgent** medical attention. In **children** they are:

- High or prolonged fever
- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Changes in mental status, such as not waking up or not interacting; being so irritable that the child does not want to be held; or seizures
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions (heart or lung disease, diabetes)

For **adults** the signs are:

- High or prolonged fever
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Near-fainting or fainting
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

**Seek medical care immediately**, either by calling your doctor or going to an emergency room, if you or someone you know is experiencing any of the signs described above or other unusually severe symptoms.

For more information about the flu, visit the CDC's website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>

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