

# “I get flu symptoms just about every year. How can I prevent or reduce them?”

Each year, millions of people are exposed to, and infected by, the flu.

It easily spreads between family members, friends and co-workers, so the source can be hard to find and avoid. But if you understand the symptoms, know your risk level and follow the prevention tips, you can lower your chances of catching the flu and passing it to others.

## What is the flu?

The flu is a contagious illness that affects the nose, throat and sometimes the lungs. It is caused by the influenza virus and is categorized as a respiratory illness, even though symptoms can also affect other parts of the body. You can catch the flu year-round, but flu viruses are most common during the fall and winter. This is considered “flu season.”

## Symptoms

People will sometimes confuse the flu with the common cold because of their similar symptoms. One thing to remember is that signs and symptoms of the flu will often start suddenly, where those of the common cold will appear more gradually. Symptoms of the flu include:

- Fever and/or chills
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches or full body aches
- Sore throat
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Vomiting and diarrhea, especially in children

Symptoms usually begin one to four days after a person is exposed to the flu and infected, with an average of about two days.

## Who is at risk?

Anyone can get the flu, regardless of health, but some groups of people are more at risk than others. Those at high risk also have a greater chance of developing serious complications which can require hospitalization, and in rare cases, result in death. These groups include:

- Pregnant women and women in the two-week period after giving birth
- Children younger than five, especially children under two

- Adults 65 and older
- People with certain diseases and disorders including:
  - Asthma
  - Chronic lung disease like COPD or cystic fibrosis
  - Heart disease
  - Diabetes (type 1 or 2)
  - Blood, liver, endocrine, metabolic or kidney disorders
  - HIV/AIDS
  - Cancer
  - Extreme obesity (BMI of 40 or more)

Environmental factors also play a role. Because of the large number of people and close contact, people who work or live in long-term care facilities, college dormitories, office buildings, hospitals and schools are at an increased risk for contracting the flu.

## Treatment

For most people who get the flu, resting at home, getting plenty of sleep and staying hydrated are the best treatment options. It can be very uncomfortable, but the flu is usually not something that requires medical attention. Most people are contagious three to four days after the infection begins, but you should stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone.

If you are in a high-risk group, and you think you have the flu, you should contact your doctor to avoid serious complications. Your doctor may decide that antiviral treatment (pills, liquid or inhaled powder) is necessary.

## Prevention

To prevent the spread of the flu to others, and to avoid catching the flu, you should follow these tips:

- **Get the flu shot.** The best way to prevent the flu is the vaccination.
- Clean your hands often. Scrub your hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds at a time. Or, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Sneeze and cough into a tissue or onto your sleeve—not into your hands!
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. And when you're sick, try to avoid others.
- Clean and disinfect areas that may be contaminated.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth as much as possible.

Other than getting the flu shot, the tips above can also be applied to preventing the spread of the common cold and other contagious sicknesses.

For more information about the flu, visit [fallonhealth.org](http://fallonhealth.org), click Healthwise® Knowledgebase under Quick links, and search "flu".

