

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

Information for the Public: Influenza Disease in West Virginia

What is influenza (“flu”)?

Influenza, which is commonly known as “flu,” is a highly contagious viral illness. In some countries, it is known by the term “Grip.” It is an illness that affects the breathing tubes and lungs.

What causes the flu?

Influenza is caused by a virus.

Who is likely to get this illness?

Influenza affects all age groups. The very young, the very old, and individuals with other health problems are at higher risk for serious illness, hospitalization, or death.

What time of the year am I likely to suffer from the illness?

Influenza peaks from December to March, but may occur earlier or later. In tropical areas, it occurs throughout the year.

How is the flu spread?

Influenza is spread from one person to another through the air. It can also be spread by direct contact with nasal discharges.

What are the symptoms?

The usual symptoms include fever (101°-102° F), chills, muscle aches, sore throat, and a dry cough. Other symptoms may include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, headache, runny nose, eye pain, and sensitivity to light. The symptoms may last two to seven days.

What are the complications?

The most common complication of the flu is pneumonia. Other complications may include Reye syndrome, brain, lung or heart problems, and death. Reye syndrome occurred in children treated with aspirin for influenza or chickenpox. Now that aspirin is no longer used in children, Reye syndrome is rare.

How is the flu diagnosed?

Influenza is diagnosed on the basis of the characteristic symptoms, particularly if it has been reported in a community. Viral cultures or rapid influenza tests can also help in diagnosis.

Can influenza be prevented?

The best protection is to get a flu shot every year before the flu season starts. Also, wash your hands often. Basic personal hygiene such as hand washing and restricting ill persons from work or school is recommended to prevent the spread of influenza.

Is there a treatment for influenza?

At present there are four drugs (Amantidine, Rimantidine, Zanamivir, and Oseltamivir) for the treatment of the flu. Amantidine and Rimantidine can be used for prevention of influenza A, and Oseltamivir is used for prevention of influenza A and B. However, these drugs are not a substitute for getting the vaccine.

When is the best time to get the vaccine (flu shot)?

The best time to get the vaccine is during October and November, but vaccination can continue into December and later, as long as vaccine is available.

Who should get the vaccine (flu shot)?

The following persons are at higher risk of complications from influenza and should obtain the influenza vaccine:

- Persons aged 65 years of age and older;
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities that house persons of any age who have chronic medical conditions;
- Adults and children who have chronic disorders of the pulmonary or cardiovascular systems, including asthma;
- Adults and children who have required regular medical follow-up or hospitalization during the previous year because of chronic metabolic diseases (including diabetes mellitus), renal dysfunction, hemoglobinopathies, or immunosuppression (including immunosuppression caused by medications or by human immunodeficiency virus);
- Children and teenagers (aged six months to 18 years) who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy and therefore might be at risk for developing Reye syndrome after influenza infection;
- Women who will be in the second or third trimester of pregnancy during the influenza season; and
- Health care workers or individuals who care for at-risk persons or live in the same household with high risk persons.

The following persons are *encouraged* to get a flu shot every year:

- Persons aged 50-64 years of age;
- Healthy children six to 23 months of age, and their household contacts and out-of-home caretakers;
- Household contacts and out-of-home caretakers of infants less than six months of age;
- People who provide essential community services;
- People at high risk for flu complications who travel to Southern hemisphere between April and September, or who travel to the tropics or in organized tourist groups at any time;
- People living in dormitories or under other crowded conditions; and
- Anyone who wants to reduce their chance of catching influenza.

What should I do if the health department reports influenza in my community and I didn't get the vaccine this year?

In most cases, you can still get the vaccine, even after influenza season has started. Just remember that it will take two weeks before the vaccine will protect you, so if you have any of the health conditions listed above, talk to your doctor. Your doctor may recommend medication with or without influenza vaccine to protect you during influenza season.