

Frequently Asked Questions about...

Influenza (for patients and visitors)

Q. Why is influenza of concern in healthcare facilities?

A. When someone has influenza and coughs or sneezes, the droplets carrying the virus spread easily. Patients in healthcare facilities often have underlying medical conditions or other factors that place them at greater risk for serious illness if they develop influenza. In addition, patients, visitors, or staff may carry the virus and spread it to others in close contact if they do not perform appropriate hand hygiene and cough etiquette.

Q. As a patient, what should I do if I develop influenza or another respiratory infection?

A. You may be asked to stay in your room as much as possible to limit contact with other patients. Be sure you have a good supply of disposable tissues and a waste container. You should try to cough and sneeze into the tissue, so droplets containing flu don't get into the air where other people could breathe them in and get infected. The influenza virus can also get on your hands when you touch your face or handle the used tissues, so you should wash your hands frequently. If you cannot get to a hand wash sink easily, you can use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Try to drink enough fluids so you never feel thirsty. If you feel feverish, weak, or short of breath, tell your care providers right away.

Q. What should my care providers be doing when I have the flu?

A. Anyone coming into your room while you are sick should be wearing a mask. This will help keep them from getting sick. Your care providers should be washing their hands before they do anything for you.

Care providers should watch carefully for complications that may arise from the flu. They may check your temperature several times per day. They should be making sure you have water, juice, or other fluids to drink, and if you are asked to remain in your room, a provider should bring your meals to you there.

Q. What should visitors do when I have the flu or if flu is going through the facility where I am a patient?

A. Family members and others who are at risk for serious illness if they get the flu should not visit when you are sick. If someone must visit you, he/she should ask the facility manager or nurse about wearing a mask while he/she is with you, and should wash his/her hands when entering and exiting your room.

You should ask family members and others to avoid visiting when they are sick. If you are uncomfortable about asking visitors to stay away, ask a nurse or the facility manager for assistance.

If a facility is experiencing an outbreak of influenza, signs may be posted on the door of the facility or the affected unit(s)/wing(s) or letters may be sent to inform family members.

Q. What about influenza vaccine?

A. Influenza vaccine is the single best method for preventing influenza and is recommended for everyone older six months of age. Influenza vaccine must be given each year because immunity wears off with time and influenza viruses change from one season to the next.

Q. Why is it especially important that patients and healthcare workers receive influenza vaccine?

A. Older people and people with other medical conditions should receive the vaccine because they are more likely to develop severe illness and require admission to a hospital. Care providers, family members, and others in close contact with high-risk individuals should also receive the vaccine so they are less likely to develop influenza and transmit it to others.

The flu vaccine is usually given in the fall before the influenza season starts. However, it can be given later – even during the flu season – and will provide protection within two weeks.

Q. What if I can't take the influenza vaccine?

A. Actually, most people *can* take the vaccine. The vaccine used for most adults is made from killed influenza virus. Because it does not contain live virus, it cannot give anyone the flu. A very small number of people are allergic to some of the materials in the vaccine, and should not receive the vaccine. Some people may experience soreness at the injection site or may develop a fever but other side effects from the vaccine are extremely rare. If you have questions about the vaccine, you should ask your healthcare provider.

Q. What about vaccine against *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (pneumococcal pneumonia)?

A. Bacterial pneumonia is a serious complication of influenza. Elderly people and those with underlying medical conditions are at greatest risk. A vaccine that protects people against pneumonia caused by the *Streptococcus pneumoniae* bacteria is available. Everyone over 60 years of age, and people with underlying medical conditions should receive the vaccine. For most people, only one dose of vaccine is required to produce immunity that lasts many years. If you have questions about the vaccine against pneumococcal infection, you should ask your healthcare provider.

Q. What about medications to treat or prevent the flu?

A. There are two prescription antiviral drugs available. One is in pill form and the other is administered directly into the respiratory system using an inhaler. These drugs can be used to treat influenza and to prevent illness in people who have been exposed. The drugs are sometimes recommended for patients and healthcare workers to stop an outbreak in a facility with many people at risk for serious illness or complications from flu.

Q. Where can I obtain additional information about influenza?

A. Another fact sheet on influenza is available on the Virginia Department of Health's website (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov>). Use the A-Z index and click on "influenza". The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has information on influenza for the public at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>. Call your local health department or your healthcare provider if you have questions about influenza vaccine or the use of antiviral drugs.