

Seasonal influenza (flu)

This leaflet is for patients, relatives and visitors and explains what flu is, how it is spread it and gives advice on prevention and managing symptoms.

What is flu?

It is a respiratory illness associated with infection by the influenza virus. Symptoms include headache, fever, cough, sore throat and aching muscles and joints. It can affect different people in a variety of ways, ranging from minor symptoms through to pneumonia and in very rare cases, death.

How serious is flu infection?

Flu usually makes people feel worse than an ordinary cold. For most people, flu infection is just a nasty experience, but for some it can lead to illnesses that are more serious. The most common complications of flu are bronchitis and pneumonia, which in some cases may require treatment in hospital. Some types of flu, such as the swine flu strain, can cause serious illness in young, otherwise healthy individuals.

What are the symptoms of flu?

The most common symptoms of flu are a rapid onset of fever, shivering, headache, muscle aches and dry cough. Most people confuse flu with a heavy cold; however, flu is usually a more severe illness than the common cold, which is caused by other respiratory viruses.

What are the symptoms of the common cold?

Cold symptoms generally include a runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation. The symptoms usually occur gradually and do not generally cause a fever or body aches.

When does flu occur?

Flu occurs most often in the winter months and usually peaks between December and March. Illnesses resembling flu may occur in the summer months but they are usually due to other viruses.

How is flu diagnosed?

Usually, a doctor will diagnose a case of the flu based on typical symptoms of fever, chills, headache, cough and body aches.

How is flu spread?

The flu virus is highly infectious and is easily passed from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Transmission can also occur by touching a surface contaminated

with respiratory secretions and then putting the fingers in the mouth or nose or near the eyes. The flu virus can live on a hard surface such as a door knob or telephone for up to 24 hours and soft surfaces such as carpets and curtains for around 20 minutes.

Advice to reduce the spread of the virus

It is important if someone has a respiratory infection that they cover their nose and mouth, preferably with a tissue, when they cough and sneeze and wash their hands straight afterwards. Used tissues should be disposed of immediately after use.

Normal household disinfection products, such as bleach, can be used to clean the room of someone who has flu, as the virus can easily be destroyed. Open the windows, wash bed linen at the highest temperature indicated on the fabric care label, making sure you wash your hands using soap and water afterwards and pay particular attention to hard surfaces including telephones door knobs and light switches.

The incubation period – the period between infection and the appearance of symptoms – is about two to three days. Although the virus is present before symptoms appear, adults are usually considered infectious once symptoms appear and for 3-5 days afterwards. This period is longer in children.

What should I do if I get flu?

Rest at home, drink plenty of fluids and take painkillers such as paracetamol if necessary. If you are generally healthy, most flu-like illnesses caused either by flu or other viruses will be short-lived and need no specific treatment or hospital admission. Medical advice should be sought from your GP if symptoms become severe or last more than about a week. Those with chronic or long-standing illness may need medical attention earlier.

Who is most at risk from the complications of flu?

The young have a greater risk of being infected because they have not developed immunity (resistance) to the virus.

The elderly have a greater risk of the severe complications of infection such as pneumonia, because they often have underlying diseases, which reduce their resistance to infection. Elderly people's immune systems may also be less effective in fighting off the virus.

Other high-risk groups include individuals who have ongoing respiratory (lung), cardiac (heart) or immune conditions that make them more vulnerable to flu and more likely to suffer severe illness.

If you are admitted to hospital

When caring for patients with suspected or confirmed infectious respiratory viruses health care workers may need to assess the infectious risk posed to themselves and, where appropriate, personal protective equipment to minimize that risk. Your health care worker will be required to wear a face mask and you may also be asked to wear a face mask to minimize risk of transmission.

What precautions should people take?

Routine vaccination offers the best protection and people who are at high risk of infection should be vaccinated annually. Keeping away from crowded places can reduce the risk of becoming infected and spreading it to others. A previous flu infection or vaccination will not necessarily provide protection against further infections because the virus is continually changing and different types circulate each winter.

Does the vaccine have any side effects?

Flu vaccines are very safe. They may cause some soreness where you were injected and, less often, a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days.

Can the vaccine cause flu?

No. The vaccine cannot cause flu because it does not contain live virus.

Questions and concerns

If you have any questions or concerns about flu, please contact your GP.

Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust Infection Control team tel: 0118 322 6914, email: infection.control@royalberkshire.nhs.uk.

How do I find out more?

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/flu/>

Health Protection Team Tel: 0344 225 3861 <https://www.gov.uk/health-protection-team>

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Simon Wells, RBFT Infection Prevention & Control, October 2022

Next review due: October 2024