

Influenza (the Flu)

The flu, also known as influenza, is a respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses and is one of the most frequent wintertime health complaints on college campuses.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of the typical flu come on quickly and usually include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Weakness
- Aches and pains
- Headaches
- Dry cough
- Sore throat

If you suddenly develop these symptoms at a time when influenza is present in the community, you probably have the flu. Even during a flu epidemic, however, other types of viral and bacterial illnesses may occur.

Seek care from a medical professional if you experience:

- Shortness of breath
- Confusion
- Production of large volumes of phlegm
- Wheezing
- Relapse of flu symptoms after 10 to 14 days

These symptoms may indicate an illness other than the flu. Individuals with diabetes or with chronic heart, lung, or kidney disease should be under the care of a health professional as soon as they develop flu-like symptoms.

TREATMENT

If you have a typical case of the flu:

- Rest in bed.
- Drink 1-2 quarts of light liquids (water, tea, soda pop, juice, clear soup, etc.) a day. Eat what you feel like eating (low fat, "light" foods are best).
- Take aspirin-free pain relievers such as Tylenol®, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen every four to six hours to reduce fever and relieve aches and pains.

Since flu is caused by viruses, antibiotics (which attack bacteria) will not work and may even be dangerous since they may cause side effects of their own. The only real cure for flu is time. A few antiviral drugs are now available that are effective in preventing and/or shortening the duration of influenza. If you have questions about antiviral drugs, you can speak with your primary care provider at UHS.

In uncomplicated flu, the fever lasts three to four days and recovery occurs within a week. While most flu symptoms disappear within a week, a dry cough and lack of energy may persist for a couple of weeks. Once the worst symptoms have passed, it is especially important to eat and rest well so that full recovery takes place as quickly as possible. Your activity level should be determined by how you feel.

Warning: Avoid using aspirin or aspirin-containing products. Aspirin use during flu and chicken pox has been associated with Reye Syndrome, a rare but serious disease. The Public Health Service warns that children and teenagers 18 years old and younger should not use aspirin for treating these illnesses. Products containing "acetaminophen" (a non-aspirin product used for relieving aches and pains and for reducing fever) should be substituted for aspirin.

COMPLICATIONS

The risk of complications and death associated with influenza is highest for individuals with diabetes; heart, lung, or kidney disease; and other chronic diseases that lower the body's resistance to infection. Persons over age 65 are also at greater risk of developing complications associated with flu.

The most serious complication associated with flu is pneumonia. Shortness of breath, sharp chest pain on deep breathing, or fever lasting beyond five days are symptoms that may indicate pneumonia. If you experience any of these, you should be examined by a health care professional. Please call UHS at 275-2662 to schedule an appointment with your primary care provider.

Taking antibiotics for the flu will not prevent the onset of viral or bacterial pneumonia. As mentioned earlier, antibiotics are not an effective treatment or means of preventing viral illnesses. Also, strains of bacteria are now known to exist that are resistant to certain antibiotics.

PREVENTION

To help maintain resistance to infections:

- Get adequate rest
- Exercise regularly
- Eat nutritiously
- Clean your hands often with soap and warm water
- Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing
- Discard your tissue after using it once
- Avoid sharing towels, utensils, and cups
- Keep your stress level down
- Avoid kissing people who are sick

There is no medical evidence that over-the-counter medications, antibiotics, or large doses of Vitamin C are effective in preventing flu (or colds).

GETTING THE FLU VACCINE

Flu vaccine is recommended for anyone who wants to reduce their risk of becoming ill during the winter months. The elderly and individuals of any age with chronic conditions such as heart, lung, or kidney disease, or diabetes should consider vaccination each year since they are at greater risk of complications or death if they acquire influenza. Annual immunization is also strongly recommended for health care workers and other personnel who have patient contact.

Individuals with multiple sclerosis, neurological illnesses, or who have had previous attacks of Guillain-Barre Syndrome should check with a physician before receiving the flu vaccine. *If you are pregnant*, ask your physician's advice before receiving the flu vaccine (or any vaccine or drug). Without clear need, physicians avoid giving any drugs or vaccines during pregnancy.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). Visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov

Monroe County Health Department: www.nyhealth.gov

World Health Organization: www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/