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Signs and Symptoms of Flu

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Aug. 26, 2024

Español

About

- Influenza (also known as “flu”) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses.
- It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death.

Flu can cause mild to severe illness. Learn the symptoms of flu.

Symptoms

Flu can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Flu symptoms usually come on suddenly. People who have flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms:

- fever* or feeling feverish/chills
- cough
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- muscle or body aches
- headaches
- fatigue (tiredness)
- some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

*It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.

Keep Reading Signs and Symptoms of Flu

Flu complications

Most people who get flu will recover in a few days to less than two weeks, but some people will develop complications (such as pneumonia) as a result of flu, some of which can be life-threatening and result in death.

Sinus and ear infections are examples of moderate complications from flu, while pneumonia is a serious flu complication that can result from either flu virus infection alone or from co-infection of flu virus and bacteria. Other possible serious complications triggered by flu can include inflammation of the heart (myocarditis), brain (encephalitis) or muscle tissues (myositis, rhabdomyolysis), and multi-organ failure (for example, respiratory and kidney failure). Flu virus infection of the respiratory tract can trigger an extreme inflammatory response in the body and can lead to sepsis, the body's life-threatening response to infection. Flu also can make chronic medical problems worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks while they have flu, and people with chronic heart disease may experience a worsening of this condition triggered by flu.

Keep Reading People at Increased Risk for Flu Complications

People at higher risk from flu

Anyone can get sick with flu, even healthy people, and serious problems related to flu can happen to anyone at any age, but some people are at higher risk of developing serious flu-related complications if they get sick. This includes people 65 years and older, people of any age with certain chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), pregnant women and children younger than 5 years, but especially those younger than 2 years old.

Keep Reading People at Increased Risk for Flu Complications

Cold versus flu
Signs and Symptoms

Cold

Influenza (Flu)

Symptom onset

Gradual

Abrupt

Fever

Rare

Common; lasts 3-4 days

Aches

Slight

Common; often severe

Chills

Uncommon

Fairly common

Fatigue, weakness

Sometimes

Usual

Sneezing

Common

Sometimes

Chest discomfort, cough

Mild to moderate; hacking cough

Common; can be severe

Stuffy nose

Common

Sometimes

Sore throat

Common

Sometimes

Headache

Rare

Common

Emergency Warning Signs of Flu Complications

People experiencing these warning signs should obtain medical care right away.

In children

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish lips or face
- Ribs pulling in with each breath
- Chest pain
- Severe muscle pain (child refuses to walk)
- Dehydration (no urine for 8 hours, dry mouth, no tears when crying)
- Not alert or interacting when awake
- Seizures
- Fever above 104 degrees Fahrenheit that is not controlled by fever-reducing medicine
- In children younger than 12 weeks, any fever
- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical conditions

In adults

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Persistent dizziness, confusion, inability to arouse
- Seizures
- Not urinating
- Severe muscle pain
- Severe weakness or unsteadiness

- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical conditions

These lists are not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptom that is severe or concerning.

Diagnosis
A number of tests are available to detect influenza viruses.

Diagnosis

The Difference Between Flu and COVID-19
Flu and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses.

Similarities and Differences between Flu and COVID-19

The Difference Between Cold and Flu
Flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses.

Cold Versus Flu

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Aug. 26, 2024

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National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD)

Influenza (Flu)

Influenza (flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs.

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