
Flu: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Updated January 5, 2011



What is the flu?

The flu is a common infectious disease caused by an influenza (flu) virus. The flu usually affects a person's breathing system. Every year from 5 to 20% of people get the flu. People who get the flu usually get it during the fall or winter- that is why it is called seasonal flu.

How does the flu spread?

The flu spreads through tiny wet drops produced when a person coughs, sneezes, or talks. A person without the flu can get it by breathing in these wet drops, or by touching items and surfaces covered with these drops and then touching their mouth, nose, or eyes.

When can someone spread the flu to others?

People who have the flu may be able to spread it to others about 1 day before getting sick to 5 - 7 days after. Children and people with weak immune systems can spread the flu virus for a longer period of time. However, people are most contagious during the first 3 days of illness.

How can I protect myself from the flu?

Use healthy habits:

- Get vaccinated for the flu
- Wash hands often with soap or water or use alcohol-based hand rub
- Cover mouths and noses with a tissue (or shirt sleeve) when sneezing, coughing, or nose blowing
- Don't share personal items like toothbrushes or drinks
- Clean frequently touched items and surfaces with soap and water

Is there a vaccine?

Yes. It is important that everyone 6 months and older get the flu vaccine. The best place to be vaccinated is in your doctor's office. Call first to see if your doctor has the vaccine. Check the SFDPH website (www.sfdcp.org/flu) or call 311 for more information about the flu.

Do I need to wear a mask?

People who feel well do not need to wear a mask. People who feel sick may be asked by their doctor to wear a mask while in the doctor's office or clinic. People who are sick may choose to wear a mask when around others.

What are signs and symptoms of the flu?

The usual signs and symptoms of the flu are cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and feeling very tired. Most people also have a fever. Others may throw-up and have diarrhea.

Is it a cold or the flu?

In general, the flu is worse than the common cold. Colds are usually milder than the flu. See the following chart for symptoms:

Symptom	Flu	Cold
Fever	Usually 102 degrees F, but can go up to 104 degrees F and usually lasts 3 to 4 days.	Rare in adults and older children, but can be as high as 102 degrees F in infants and small children.
Headache	Sudden onset and can be severe	Rare
Muscle Aches	Usually, and often severe	None or mild
Tiredness and Weakness	Can last 2 or more weeks	Mild
Extreme Exhaustion	Sudden onset and can be severe	Never
Runny Nose	Sometimes	Often
Sneezing	Sometimes	Often
Sore Throat	Sometimes	Often
Cough	Usually, and can become severe	Mild to moderate

How serious is the flu?

The flu does not usually cause serious problems. Occasionally it can cause severe disease. Some people have been hospitalized and a small number of people have died. Historically, seasonal flu causes about 23,600 deaths in the United States each year.

Who is more likely to get very sick with the flu?

Below is a list of people who can get very sick if they have the flu:

- People with lung disease like asthma
- People of all ages with ongoing medical conditions like diabetes, heart disease, kidney or liver disease, blood cell disease including sickle cell, or neurological diseases that affect swallowing or breathing
- Pregnant women and women who have given birth within 2 weeks
- Children younger than 5, especially those younger than 2 years old
- Adults age 50 years and over
- People with weak immune systems (due to disease or medicines)

CHECK FOR UPDATED FLU INFORMATION AT
www.sfcddcp.org/flu
 OR
in San Francisco call 311

The San Francisco Department of Health provides this guidance based on the best current information. Recommendations may change, and SF recommendations may sometimes differ from those issued by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the California Department of Public Health. Visit our website for the most current updates, forms, FAQs and useful links: www.sfcddcp.org