

Preparing for Flu Season

The flu season typically spans the fall and winter months in the United States, with the illness peaking between December and March. Now is the time to prepare.

Influenza is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. The illness can be mild to severe and some infections can result in hospitalization or even death. There are actually four types of influenza viruses. Type A and B viruses cause seasonal epidemics almost every year. Influenza type C viruses cause mild respiratory illness and are not associated with epidemics. Type D viruses are primarily found in cattle and are not known to cause human illness.

Symptoms of influenza often develop suddenly and include fever, body aches and muscle pain, headache, sore throat, dry cough, and fatigue. The body aches and pains are often severe. Nausea and vomiting are not typical, but can be seen in children. In most healthy people, symptoms resolve in 5-7 days, the worst of the symptoms lasting 3-4 days. The fatigue and dry cough though, can take a week or more to fully resolve.

Influenza generally travels from person to person through the air, although touching one's eyes, nose or mouth after touching a contaminated surface may also spread the illness. It was previously thought that influenza virus traveled only a short distance by large particle droplets during coughing or sneezing, but recent studies have shown that the virus can spread up to 6 feet from an infected person via minute particles released in the air during talking and breathing.

It can take 1 to 4 days after being exposed to influenza to develop symptoms of the disease. Adults may be able to infect other people beginning 1 day before their symptoms start and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Children may pass the virus for longer than 7 days.

Getting a yearly flu vaccine—which will be discussed in a future article—is the single best way to protect you and your family from influenza. Other preventative actions include avoiding close contact with sick people, frequent hand washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and refraining from touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.

If you get the flu, stay home from school or work and do not return until you have been fever free for 24 hours. Call your doctor to see if antiviral drugs might be appropriate for you. Antiviral drugs, if started early in the illness, can lessen the severity and shorten the duration of influenza.

Flu shots and more information about influenza are available at the Adams County Health Department, 937-544-5547.

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