

Winter Action Patient Information Leaflet

INFLUENZA



Influenza is an infection caused by a virus. So are “normal” coughs and colds. However, if you are infected by the influenza virus, you will feel much more ill than you would do with a normal cold.

What does it mean?

Flu will mean you will feel very ill for up to a week. If you are otherwise in good health, you should recover completely. Because flu is caused by a viral infection, antibiotics will not help you recover at all.

Why has it happened to me?

Influenza is very easy to catch – it is spread in droplets through the air. Anyone can catch flu. However, if you are in a high-risk group, you are much more likely to suffer from complications of flu, such as pneumonia. You are in a high-risk group if you :

- Are over 65
- Live in a nursing home
- Suffer from diabetes
- Have long-term heart or lung disease (including asthma)
- Have kidney failure
- Have problems with your immune system, which might reduce your ability to fight off infection. This applies to you if you are on chemotherapy, have had your spleen removed, are HIV-positive and so on. Because high-risk groups are more likely to suffer complications of flu, it is recommended that they have the flu immunisation. The jab can cut the risk of getting flu by up to 70%. It will not protect against other causes of winter coughs and colds, though. You will need to have this injection every year, between October and March. Ask the GP or practice nurse about getting the flu jab.

What symptoms can I expect?

Flu tends to start with a high fever – between 38° and 40°. You will probably also have :

- Headache, muscle aches and aching eyes
- Chills and shivers
- A cough (usually dry and harsh)
- Sore throat and/or pain in your sinuses and ears

These symptoms tend to last for three to five days although you may feel generally weak and under the weather for us to two weeks.

What is the short-term treatment ?

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- Go to bed and get lots of rest
- Take regular painkillers, such as paracetamol. This will relieve the headache, muscle aches, sore throat and fever
- Drink plenty of fluids, avoiding alcohol and caffeine
- Use steam inhalations for your cough (add a teaspoon of Olbas oil or Vicks to a bowl of steamy water and sit over it with a towel over your head for at least 15 minutes twice a day)
- Ask a relative or friend to visit a pharmacist to ask about preparations to soothe your symptoms
- Nowadays, there are drugs that are sometimes used treat flu. They are only recommended in high-risk a groups and only work if started within the first two days of symptoms. Their effect is not dramatic – they just shorten the illness by a day or so.

What should I look out for?

If you get sharp chest pains when you breathe, become suddenly short of breath, get wheezy or cough up blood, you should seek medical help.

What about the longer term ?

Flu rarely causes any long-term complications. If you are in a high-risk group, though you should make sure that you get a flu jab every winter.