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Flu Facts

Flu Season Is October to May

Each year from October to May, millions of people all across the United States come down with the flu. Kids get the flu most often. But people in every age group — including teens — can catch it.

What Is the Flu?

Flu is the common name for **influenza**. It's a virus that infects the nose, throat, and lungs.

Often, when you're sick with a virus, your body builds a defense system by making **antibodies** against it. That means you usually don't get that particular type of virus again. Unfortunately, flu viruses mutate (change) each year. So you aren't protected from getting the flu forever.

Some years the change in the flu virus is slight. So if you do get the flu, it's mild. The antibodies from having the flu before give you some protection. But every 10 years or so, the flu virus goes through a major change and many people get severe cases. These large-scale outbreaks are called **epidemics**. If they spread worldwide, they're called **pandemics**.

How Does the Flu Spread?

The flu virus spreads through the air when a person who has the virus sneezes, coughs, or speaks. The flu can sometimes spread through objects that someone with the virus touched, sneezed, or coughed on. When a healthy person touches these contaminated items and then touches their mouth or nose, the virus can enter their system.

People carrying the virus can be contagious 1 day before their symptoms start and about 5 to 7 days after they first get symptoms. So it's possible to spread the flu before you know you're sick.

Flu epidemics often start in schools and then move quickly through a community as students spread the virus to family members and people around them.

How Do I Know if I Have the Flu?

Flu symptoms start 1–4 days after a person was exposed to the virus. The main symptoms of flu are:

- headache
- sore throat
- a high fever
- chills
- muscle aches
- stuffy nose
- dry cough
- feeling very tired
- loss of appetite

The fever and aches usually stop in a few days. But the sore throat, cough, stuffy nose, and tiredness may continue for a week or more.

The flu also can cause vomiting, belly pain, and diarrhea. But if you have only vomiting and diarrhea without the other flu symptoms, you probably have gastroenteritis. Some kinds of gastroenteritis are called the "stomach flu," but they're not the same as influenza. Some gastrointestinal infections are caused by non-flu viruses or bacteria.

You may feel miserable if you get the flu, but it's unlikely to be serious. It's rare that healthy teens get other problems from the flu. Older adults (over age 65), young kids (under age 5), and people with ongoing medical conditions are more likely to become seriously ill with the flu.

What to Do When the Flu Bugs You

If you get the flu, the best way to take care of yourself is to rest in bed and drink lots of liquids like water and other non-caffeinated drinks. Stay home from school until you feel better and your temperature has returned to normal.

Most people get better on their own after the virus runs its course. But call your doctor if you have the flu and:

- you're getting worse instead of better
- you have trouble breathing
- you have a medical condition (for example, diabetes, heart problems, asthma, or other lung problems)

Most teens can take acetaminophen or ibuprofen to help with fever and aches. **Don't take aspirin or any products that contain aspirin, though.** If kids and teens take aspirin while they have the flu, it puts them at risk for Reye syndrome, which is rare but can be serious.

Antibiotics don't work on viruses, so they won't help someone with the flu get better. Sometimes doctors can prescribe an antiviral medicine to cut down how long a person is ill from the flu. These medicines are effective only against some types of flu virus and must be taken within 48 hours of when symptoms start. Doctors usually use this medicine for people who are very young, elderly, or at risk for serious problems, like people with asthma.

What's the Flu Vaccine?

Everyone older than 6 months should get a flu vaccine.

Flu vaccines are available as a shot or as a nasal spray:

- The shot contains killed flu viruses.
- The nasal spray contains weakened live flu virus, which can't actually cause the flu.

Both will make your body create antibodies that fight off infection if you come into contact with the live flu virus, and both work equally well. This flu season (2019-2020), get whichever vaccine your doctor recommends. People with weak immune systems or some health conditions (such as asthma) and pregnant women should **not** get the nasal spray vaccine.

If you have an egg allergy, get your flu shot in a doctor's office, not at a supermarket, drugstore, or other venue.

Most people don't have reactions to a flu shot, although a few may notice a fever, sore muscles, and tiredness. The nasal spray vaccine might cause mild flu-like symptoms.

The flu vaccine is usually given a few weeks before flu season begins to allow the body time to develop antibodies beforehand. It's best to get it before the end of October. **But you can still get a flu vaccine even after flu season starts.**

What else can you do? Wash your hands well and often. Avoid sharing cups, utensils, or towels with others. If you do catch the flu, use tissues whenever you sneeze or cough to avoid spreading the virus.

If you do get the flu this season, take care of yourself and call your doctor with any questions or concerns. When you're feeling bad, remember that the flu usually lasts a week or less and you'll be back to normal before too long.

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Note: All information on TeensHealth® is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

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