

Flu and Flu-Like Illnesses

Flu and flu-like illnesses cause a high temperature, muscle aches, and various other symptoms. Most people fully recover, but complications such as a chest infection develop in some cases. If you are at increased risk of developing complications, you should be immunised against flu each autumn.

What are flu and flu-like illnesses?

Influenza (flu) is caused by the influenza virus. However, many other viruses can cause an illness similar to flu. It is often difficult to say exactly which virus is causing the illness. So, doctors commonly make a diagnosis of a 'flu-like illness'.

Each winter a different strain of the influenza virus causes an outbreak of flu which affects many people. During an outbreak of flu, if you get a 'flu-like' illness it is more likely to be caused by the influenza virus than to another type of virus.

What are the symptoms of flu or a flu-like illness?

Typical symptoms include: high temperature (fever), sweats, muscle aches, a dry cough, sore throat, sneezing, and headache. You may also feel sick. The illness caused by the influenza virus tends to be worse than illnesses caused by other viruses which cause a 'flu-like' illness. Even if you are young and fit, flu can make you ill enough to need to go to bed.

Symptoms peak after 1-2 days, and then gradually wear off over several days. Tiredness and a dry cough may persist for a few more days. Most people recover completely within 1-2 weeks.

What else could my symptoms be due to?

Other serious illnesses can have similar symptoms to flu when they first develop. For example, meningitis, malaria and pneumonia. If you have a more serious illness, additional symptoms usually develop in addition to those mentioned above. Symptoms to look out for which may mean that you have a different and more severe illness include:

- Rash - in particular if dark red spots develop that do not fade when pressed.
- Stiff neck - particularly if you cannot bend your neck forward.
- A headache which becomes worse and worse.
- Dislike of bright lights - if you need to shut your eyes and turn away from the light.
- Drowsiness or confusion.
- Repeated vomiting.
- Chest pains.

Note: also, tell a doctor if you have flu-like symptoms, but have been to a country where malaria is present within the last year.

What is the treatment for flu and flu-like illnesses?

Your immune system will usually clear viruses which cause flu and flu-like illnesses. Treatment aims to ease symptoms until the infection goes.

- Paracetamol or ibuprofen will lower your temperature, and ease aches and pains.
- Aspirin is an alternative for adults, but aspirin should not be given to children under 16.
- Don't wrap up, instead try and cool down.
- Have lots to drink to prevent mild dehydration (low body fluid).

Antibiotics

Antibiotics kill bacteria, but do not kill viruses. So, they are not prescribed for viral illnesses such as flu. However, they may be used if a complication develops such as a secondary bacterial chest infection (see below).

What are the possible complications of flu and flu-like illnesses?

If you are normally well, then you are unlikely to develop complications. You are likely to fully recover. But, see a doctor if symptoms change or become worse. Complications are more likely to develop if you are in any of the 'at risk' groups listed below.

The most common complication is a 'secondary' bacterial chest infection which may develop in addition to the virus infection. This can sometimes become serious and develop into pneumonia. A course of antibiotics will usually cure this, but the infection sometimes becomes life-threatening, particularly in the frail and elderly. Other serious complications are uncommon.

But note: it is normal to have a mild cough and phlegm for about 2 weeks following flu and flu-like illnesses. Green phlegm does not necessarily mean you have a secondary chest infection. The symptoms to look out for which may indicate a chest infection include: a recurrence of a high temperature, worsening of cough, shortness of breath, chest pain.

Who should be immunised against flu?

Flu immunisation (the 'flu-jab') gives good protection against the influenza virus, and lasts for one year. The vaccine is normally ready by the autumn each year. It is made from the strains of flu virus which are expected in the coming winter. You need a yearly immunisation to keep protected.

The aim is to protect people who are more likely to develop complications from flu. You should be immunised if you:

- have a lung disease such as asthma, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, etc.
- have heart disease, a serious kidney disease, or diabetes.
- have a poor immune system. (For example, if you have no spleen, are taking chemotherapy or steroid treatment, if you have HIV/AIDS, etc.)
- are aged 65 or over.
- live in a nursing home or other long stay residential care accommodation.

If you are healthy and under 65, you do not need a flu immunisation (as you are unlikely to develop complications from flu.) However, staff involved in direct patient

care may be offered immunisation from their employer.