

INFLUENZA

BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A common, contagious respiratory infection caused by a virus. Incubation after exposure is 24 to 48 hours. There are three main types of influenza (A, B, C), but they have the ability to mutate into different forms. Outbreaks of different forms occur almost every winter with varying degrees of severity. Influenza affects both sexes and all ages except infants.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Chills and moderate to high fever.
- Muscle aches, including backache.
- Cough, usually with little or no sputum.
- Sore throat.
- Hoarseness.
- Runny nose.
- Headache.
- Fatigue.

CAUSES

Infection by viruses of the myxovirus class. The viruses spread by personal contact or indirect contact (use of a contaminated drinking glass).

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Stress.
- Excessive fatigue.
- Poor nutrition.
- Recent illness that has lowered resistance.
- Chronic illness, especially chronic lung or heart disease.
- Pregnancy (3rd trimester).
- Students.
- People in semi-closed environments.
- Immunosuppression from drugs or illness.
- Crowded places during an epidemic.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Avoid risks listed above.
- Have a yearly influenza vaccine injection if you are over age 65 or have chronic heart or lung disease. The vaccine only protects against two or three specific strains of influenza A.
- Avoid unnecessary contact with persons who have upper-respiratory infections during the flu season (winter).
- Use of the drug amantadine for high-risk persons (that have not been vaccinated) or need additional control measures.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Spontaneous recovery in 7 to 14 days if no complications occur. If complications arise, treatment with antibiotics is usually necessary, and recovery may take 3 to 6 weeks.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Bacterial infections, including bronchitis or pneumonia. These can be especially dangerous for chronically ill persons or those over age 65.

TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Laboratory studies, such as blood tests and sputum culture; X-rays of the chest (only for complications).
- To relieve nasal congestion, use salt-water drops (1 teaspoon of salt to 1 quart of water).
- To relieve a sore throat, gargle often with warm or cold, double-strength tea or salt water.
- Use a cool-mist humidifier to increase air moisture. This thins lung secretions so they can be coughed up more easily. Don't put medicine in the humidifier; it does not help. Clean humidifier daily.
- To avoid spreading germs to others, wash your hands frequently, especially after blowing your nose or before handling food.
- Use warm compresses or heating pad for aching muscles.

MEDICATIONS

- For minor discomfort, you may use non-prescription drugs, such as acetaminophen, cough syrups, nasal sprays or decongestants.
- Do not take aspirin. Some research shows a link between the use of aspirin (especially in children) during a virus illness and the development of Reye's syndrome (a type of encephalitis).
- A class of antiviral drugs may be prescribed for seriously ill persons or for those at greatest risk from complications.

ACTIVITY

Rest is the best medicine. If you are in good general health, rest helps your body fight the virus.

DIET

- Appetite is usually lacking. You may just want liquids at first, then progress to small meals of bland starchy foods (dry toast, rice, pudding, cooked cereal, baked potatoes).
- Drink at least 8 glasses of water a day (especially if you have a high fever). Extra fluids, including fruit juice, tea and noncarbonated drinks, also help thin lung secretions.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of influenza.
- The following occur during treatment:
 - Increased fever or cough.
 - Blood in the sputum.
 - Earache.
 - Shortness of breath or chest pain.
 - Thick discharge from the nose, sinuses or ears.
 - Sinus pain.
 - Neck pain or stiffness.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Drugs in treatment may produce side effects.

Adapted from Instructions for Patients, Sixth Edition, H. Winter Griffith, M.D., W.B Saunders Company.