

# Influenza

Influenza is an infection mainly affecting the respiratory tract, including the throat and airways. It is caused by a family of related viruses and can become quite severe. Most children with influenza recover completely. However, full recovery may take several weeks, and complications may occur. Getting a yearly “flu shot” helps prevent influenza.

## What is influenza?

Influenza is an infectious illness caused by a certain family of viruses. Worldwide outbreaks of influenza occur each year, with young children being at high risk of infection. Influenza is highly contagious and can spread rapidly through communities, especially in places like schools or hospitals.

Influenza can develop suddenly, become quite severe. Although most children with influenza recover completely, there is a risk of further infection such as ear infections and pneumonia.

## What does it look like?

The symptoms and severity of influenza depend on several factors, including the characteristics of the influenza virus that is being spread in your community. Illness may develop quite suddenly: within 2 or 3 days after your child is exposed to the influenza virus.

Some common symptoms of influenza are:

- Fever and chills, usually lasting 2 to 4 days.
- Dry cough, which may continue for a long time.
- Sore throat.
- Headache and muscle aches.
- Runny nose and eyes.
- Malaise; “feeling sick.”
- Diarrhea.

Other members of your family may be sick at the same time. Infants and young children may develop more severe symptoms, including high fevers.

## What causes influenza?

Influenza is caused by a family of related viruses, with slightly different viruses “going around” each year.

Once your child has been exposed to a specific influenza virus, he or she will usually become immune to it. Because babies and young children have not been exposed to as many influenza viruses, they may be more likely to catch influenza.

## What are some possible complications of influenza?

- Ear infections (otitis media) occur in up to one fourth of children with influenza.
- Pneumonia (infection of the lungs).
- Other complications such as myositis (inflammation of the muscles) or myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle) are possible but uncommon.

## What puts your child at risk of influenza?

- Infants and young children are more likely to be infected with influenza virus and may have more severe symptoms.
- Influenza is most common during the winter months.
- Influenza is more likely to cause more problems in children with pre-existing health problems (such as heart disease, asthma, or cystic fibrosis).

## Can influenza be prevented?

- Getting a yearly influenza vaccination (“flu shot”) can help prevent influenza. Currently, influenza vaccination is recommended for all children between 6 months and 5 years old. It is also recommended for children with certain high-risk diseases, such as diseases of the heart or lungs (including asthma), cancer, or HIV or other conditions causing reduced immune function.
- Influenza vaccination is also recommended for adults who are in close contact with “high-risk” children, and for women who will be in the second or third trimester of pregnancy during “flu season.” Ask your doctor whether your child, you, or other family members should get vaccinated.
- Certain antiviral drugs may be used to treat or prevent influenza in children and adults who have been exposed to influenza outbreaks at home, school, or work.

## How is influenza diagnosed and treated?

- Diagnosis is based on symptoms and whether a lot of cases are occurring in the community at the time. If necessary, tests on mucous from the nose and throat can be done.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of rest and drinks extra liquids.

- Pain relievers (such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen) may help to lower fever and reduce pain from sore throat, headache, or muscle aches. *Do not* give aspirin to children with influenza, because it may lead to a serious complication called Reye's syndrome.
- We will probably not treat your child's influenza with antibiotics, because these medications only kill bacteria, not viruses. However, if your child develops another infection, such as an ear infection or pneumonia, antibiotics may be recommended.
- Certain antiviral medications such as Tamiflu (generic name: oseltamivir) may be used. These drugs may help your child to feel better and get better faster. However, they are only effective if treatment begins within 2 days after the first symptoms of influenza.
- Most children with influenza recover completely. However, it may take up to several weeks until your child's cough disappears completely and he or she is completely back to normal.



### When should I call your office?

Your child's symptoms of influenza should start to get better within 4 or 5 days. If not, or if symptoms get worse, call our office.

Call our office if your child has fever lasting longer than 3 or 4 days, or if the fever gets better and then returns.

Call our office if your child develops other symptoms, including:

- Earache.
- Severe headache.
- Any difficulty breathing, or fast breathing.
- Bloody sputum.
- Muscle weakness or pain developing a week or more after the initial illness.
- Any signs of dehydration (dryness inside the mouth, decreased urination).