

Infection Prevention Control

Influenza and respiratory viruses

A respiratory virus is an illness that infects the respiratory (breathing) system. There are a wide variety of different respiratory viruses, the most well-known being Influenza (commonly known as 'flu').

Respiratory viruses can affect any age group. The symptoms vary in severity from person to person and can be very mild or quite severe. The viruses may make other illnesses worse, such as asthma or COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease). Those most at risk of complications are young children, the elderly, and people with weaker immune systems or other chronic illnesses.

Respiratory viruses include:

- Influenza A and B
- Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)
- Para influenza viruses
- Adenoviruses
- Human metapneumovirus
- Coronaviruses
- Rhinoviruses

→ All these viruses can cause symptoms of a high temperature, a cough and a runny nose.

The most common symptoms of flu include:

- Shivering
- Headache



Patient Information

- Sore throat
- Muscle aches
- A dry cough
- A high temperature

Symptoms typically last for up to 5 days in adults and 7 days in children and can make you feel so unwell that you have to stay in bed and rest until you feel better.

Cold or flu?

These respiratory viruses can cause a range of symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes, sore throat and raised temperature. Some viruses usually cause what we often call the 'common cold'. However, they can also cause 'influenza-like illness' which can be similar in symptoms and severity to flu itself.

How do respiratory viruses spread?

Respiratory viruses spread easily from one person to another. When someone with a virus coughs or sneezes, the virus can travel in droplets to other people nearby.

It can also spread when people touch surfaces that have been contaminated with the virus and then touch their mouth, nose and eyes. The flu virus can live on surfaces like door handles and telephones for up to 24 hours.

Whether your symptoms are that of an influenza-like illness or the common cold, please make sure that you:

- Cover your nose and mouth if you sneeze or cough (preferably with a tissue)
- Put used tissues in a bin
- Wash your hands or use alcohol gel regularly, and always after coughing, sneezing or touching contaminated objects or surfaces
- Keep surfaces clean

Patient Information

Treating respiratory viruses

At home:

If you have flu or another respiratory virus at home, you should:

- Rest
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Take pain relief medication (such as Paracetamol) if you need to

If you have a temperature, stay away from school, work, young children and the elderly.

Most people get better without needing any treatment. Seek medical advice if your symptoms become more severe or last longer than a week.

If you are pregnant or you have a chronic or long standing illness, and you develop symptoms of flu or another respiratory virus contact your GP for advice.

In hospital:

In hospital we will take nose and throat swabs to test for flu and other respiratory viruses. If you have flu and are coughing, we may give you a bed in a single room so that the virus doesn't spread to other patients, staff and visitors.

In some cases, we may need to treat your respiratory virus in hospital. This may be because your symptoms are more severe or lead to further illness, or because you develop the symptoms while you are being treated in hospital for another condition.

The healthcare team may wear masks, aprons and visors when caring for you. If you need to leave your side room (for example, to go for an x-ray), we may ask you to wear a mask while you are outside the room.

If you have 'flu', we may prescribe you oseltamivir (known as Tamiflu). These treatments work best if you start them in the first two days of having symptoms.

Patient Information

Flu vaccination

The best way to protect yourself against flu is to have the flu vaccination each winter and to be diligent with your hand hygiene. If you are at high risk of infection, make sure you have your vaccination every year.

The hospital provides flu vaccinations for staff each winter to reduce the risk of flu spreading.

Useful links

Public Health England

www.gov.uk/government/collections/annual-flu-programme

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

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