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Flu (Influenza)

What is the flu?

The flu is a viral infection of the nose, throat, windpipe, and bronchi that occurs every winter. The main symptoms are a runny nose, sore throat, and nagging cough. Usually there's more muscle pain, headache, fever, and chills than seen with colds.

What causes the flu?

Flu is caused by influenza viruses. Flu viruses change yearly, which is why people can get the flu every year. The virus is spread by sneezing, coughing, and hand contact. It spreads rapidly because the incubation period is only 1 to 3 days and the virus is very contagious.

How can I take care of my child?

The treatment of flu depends on a child's main symptoms and is no different from the treatment for other viral respiratory infections. Bed rest is not necessary.

- **Fever or aches**

Use acetaminophen (Tylenol) every 6 hours or ibuprofen (Advil) every 8 hours for discomfort or fever over 102°F (39°C). Children and adolescents who may have influenza should never take aspirin because it may cause Reye's syndrome.

- **Cough or hoarseness**

For children over age 6 years give cough drops. If your child is over 1 year of age, give honey (1/2 to 1 teaspoon as needed). Never give honey to babies. If honey is not available, you can use corn syrup.

- **Sore throat**

Use hard candy for children over 6 years old. Warm chicken broth may also help children over 1 year old.

- **Stuffy or blocked nose**

Saline nose drops or spray followed by suction (or nose blowing) will open most blocked noses. Use nasal washes at least 4 times a day or whenever your child can't breathe through the nose. You can buy saline nose drops or spray without a prescription.

- **Fluids**

Encourage your child to drink adequate fluids to prevent dehydration.

How long will the flu last?

The fever lasts 2 to 3 days, the runny or stuffy nose 1 to 2 weeks, and the cough 2 to 3 weeks.

Your child may return to day care or school after the fever is gone and he feels up to it.

Who are high-risk children?

Children are considered high-risk for complications if they have the following conditions:

- Lung disease, such as cystic fibrosis
- Heart disease, such as a congenital heart disease
- Muscle disease, such as muscular dystrophy
- Metabolic disease, such as diabetes
- Sickle cell disease
- Renal disease, such as nephrotic syndrome
- Cancer or immune system conditions
- Diseases requiring long-term aspirin therapy
- Pregnant teens
- Severe obesity (BMI greater than 40)
- Age less than 2 years and no medical conditions

Does my child need antiviral medicine?

Antiviral medicines must be started within 48 hours of the start of influenza symptoms to have any effect. They reduce the time your child is sick by 1 or 2 days. They do not cure the disease nor remove all the symptoms. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends they be used for all HIGH-RISK children. Antiviral medicines are recommended for healthy children only if they develop a complication of flu. Talk with your healthcare provider about this. After close contact with someone who has the flu, the CDC recommends early treatment of those who come down with the disease rather than post-exposure antiviral medicine (prophylaxis).

Does my child need a flu shot?

Yearly flu shots are the best way to prevent the spread of influenza. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children over age 6 months be given a flu shot. Recent research has shown that healthy children younger than 24 months are at as great a risk of complications as children with the high-risk conditions listed above.

The nasal spray flu vaccine (FluMist) may be given to healthy children over the age of 2 years old.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Your child is having trouble breathing.
- Your child starts to act very sick.

Call during office hours if:

- Your child develops any complications such as an earache, sinus pain or pressure, or a fever lasting over 3 days.
- You have other questions or concerns.