

# The Flu

*A Guide for Parents, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)*

## **What is the Flu?**

The flu (influenza) is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that is caused by influenza virus. The flu can spread from person to person. Most people with flu are sick for about a week, but then feel better. However, some people (especially young children, pregnant women, older people, and people with chronic health problems) can get very sick and some can die.

## **What are the symptoms of the flu?**

Most people with the flu feel tired and have fever (usually high), headache, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and sore muscles. Some people, especially children, may also have stomach problems and diarrhea. Cough can last two or more weeks.

## **How does the flu spread?**

People that have the flu usually cough, sneeze and have a runny nose. This makes droplets with virus in them. Other people can get the flu by breathing in these droplets, getting them in their nose or mouth, or touching contaminated surfaces.

## **How long can a sick person spread the flu to others?**

Healthy adults may be able to spread the flu from 1 day before getting sick to up to 5 days after getting sick. This can be longer in children and in people who don't fight disease as well (people with weakened immune systems).

## **How can I protect my child from the flu?**

A flu vaccine is the best way to protect against the flu. CDC recommends that all children from the ages of 6 months up to their 19th birthday get a flu vaccine every fall or winter (children getting a vaccine for the first time need two doses).

- Flu shots can be given to children 6 months and older.
- A nasal-spray vaccine can be given to healthy children 2 years and older (children under 5 years old who have had wheezing in the past year or any child with chronic health problems should get the flu shot).

You can protect your child by getting a flu vaccine for yourself too. Also encourage your child's close contacts to get a flu vaccine. This is very important if your child is younger than 5 or has a chronic health problem like asthma (breathing disease) or diabetes (high blood sugar levels).

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## What Can YOU Do?

### How else can I protect my child against the flu?

1. Take time to get a flu vaccine and get your child vaccinated too.
2. Take everyday steps to prevent the spread of germs. This includes:
  - Clear your hands often and cover your coughs and sneezes
  - Tell your child to:
    - Stay away from people who are sick
    - Clean hands often
    - Keep hands away from face
    - Cover coughs and sneezes to protect others (it's best to use a tissue and throw it away).

### What should I use for hand cleaning?

Washing hands with soap and water (for as long as it takes to sing the Happy Birthday song twice) will help protect your child from many different germs. When soap and water are not available, wipes or gels with alcohol in them can be used (The gels should be rubbed into your hands until they are dry).

### What can I do if my child gets sick?

Consult your doctor and make sure your child gets plenty of rest and drinks a lot of fluids. If your child is older than 2 years, you can buy medicine (over-the-counter) without a prescription that might make your child feel better. Be careful with these medicines and follow the instructions on the package. But never give aspirin or medicine that has aspirin in it to children or teenagers who may have the flu.

### What if my child seems very sick?

Call or take your child to a doctor right away if your child:

- Has a high fever or fever that lasts a long time
- Has trouble breathing or breathes fast
- Has skin that looks blue
- Is not drinking enough
- Seems confused, will not wake up, does not want to be held, or has seizures (uncontrolled shaking)
- Gets better but then worse again
- Has other conditions (like heart or lung disease, diabetes) that get worse

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## What Can YOU Do?

**Can my child go to school if he or she is sick?**

No. Your child should stay home to rest and to avoid giving the flu to other children.

**Should my child go to school if other children are sick?**

It is not unusual for some children in school to get sick during the winter months. If many children get sick, it is up to you to decide whether to send your child to school. You might want to check with your doctor, especially if your child has other health problems.

**When can my child go back to school after having the flu?**

Keep your child home from school until his or her temperature has been normal for 24 hours. Remind your children to cover their mouth when coughing or sneezing, to protect others (you may want to send some tissue and wipes or gels with alcohol in them to school with your child).