

Influenza in Older Children and Teenagers

Influenza, usually called “The Flu,” is an illness caused by a virus. Although many viral illnesses are called “The Flu,” Influenza viruses tend to cause an illness that is more severe than those caused by the 200 or so other cold viruses. Outbreaks occur most often in the winter. Generally the spread of the illness is covered in the news and other people that you know will be affected with similar symptoms.

Although there is some variation from year to year and from person to person, most people will experience fever, frequently in the range to 101 to 103 degrees, and occasionally higher. Other symptoms typically include fatigue, runny nose and congestion, sore throat, cough, headache, muscle aches, nausea, vomiting and occasionally diarrhea. As with most cold viruses, the discharge from the nose will often become cloudy and discolored for as long as 2 weeks. By itself, this does not mean that you have a sinus infection. Discolored phlegm with cough is expected for up to 2 weeks.

People who have the flu will sleep more than usual and will generally will not be very active. However, there should be some intervals of time during the day when they are active and alert. They may be interested in reading a book, talking with you, or watching T.V.

They should be willing to take fluids, at least in small but frequent amounts. Milk is OK (it does not thicken the mucous or make the illness worse). If significant vomiting develops, change the fluids to one of the oral hydration solutions such as Pedialite. If they are not urinating at least 2-3 times per day, they are not drinking enough. Offering fluids every 15 minutes or more is a good idea.

People who have the Flu will probably not be hungry and will not likely eat very much solid foods until they are feeling better. Chicken soup, toast, crackers, apple sauce and other easily digestible foods may be better accepted. If diarrhea develops, limit the foods with large amounts of sugar.

The fever may be fairly high in people who have the Flu. A fever of 105 should prompt a call to our office. If the fever is lower than this, continue to assess responsiveness, repeatedly. If the affected individual sleeps for more than 3-4 hours during the daytime, arouse them briefly. They may not be interested in doing anything. They will likely still seem tired, but they should react appropriately to your presence. Offer some fluid and Tylenol (but never aspirin). If they fall back asleep, check them again in a few hours. If they will not arouse well or are becoming increasingly less responsive through the day, you should call our office. The fever associated with influenza not only is often higher than with most other viral illnesses, it tends to last longer. Five days of fever with influenza is not uncommon. Usually the fever can be brought down by using Acetamenophen (Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (Motrin/Advil/Nupren) if you prefer. Often the fever will not go down to completely normal range even when the medications are used. However, if the fever lasts longer than 5 days, please call our office.

The cough and other symptoms may appear fairly severe. Over the counter medications may be modestly helpful. Prescription medications generally cause more side effects and have not been proven to offer any additional significant benefit.

- Throat lozenges may help the sore throat and cough, and do not cause side effects.
- Acetamenophen(Tylenol) may help the sore throat, and muscle or headaches. It may be given every 4 hours as needed and it is quite safe.
- Motrin, Nupren, and Advil may help in a way similar to Acetamenophen. They are somewhat more likely to cause abdominal pain or nausea. They do last a little longer between each dose (up to 6 hours).
- Never use aspirin for suspected influenza virus symptoms.
- Sinus pressure sensation is common on and off in people who are suffering from influenza and other colds. This is usually felt beside the nose and above or behind the eyes. It is caused by blockage of the openings of the sinuses into the nose from the congestion caused by the virus. Using a

humidifier and a decongestant medication such as Sudafed, may help this feeling of congestion. A decongestant spray such as Afrin or Neosynephrine may help. However, do not use the decongestant spray for more than 3 days or the congestion between uses may actually increase.

- Dextromethorphan containing cough syrups may help the cough somewhat. Examples are Delsym and Robitussin D.M. Narcotic prescriptions containing codeine and hydrocodone are occasionally used but may cause nausea, vomiting, constipation, and drowsiness. They are best used at bedtime only and should not be used prior to going to school driving at car or operating machinery. Remember that coughing at school or work is a problem, but you also need to be able to think.
- Antihistamines are supposed to stop the runny nose. They don't work for this with Influenza. They are often included with decongestants in medications such as Dimetapp, Triaminic, and multiple other medications. They may help a affected individuals sleep but they may also make some people irritable and may actually cause problems falling asleep at times. If you are already using an antihistamine with a decongestant, and it seems to be helpful for the congestion and not causing other problems, there is no need to switch to something else.

Unfortunately, you should expect the symptoms of Influenza to last from 1- 2 weeks. If the symptoms are not improving within 2 weeks from the start of the illness, this may also be a sign of a secondary bacterial infection. If this occurs please call our office.

Amantadine is a medication that may be used in special circumstances for Influenza A (but not other respiratory viruses). It may help to reduce the duration of the illness by a day or two when started within the first 24 hours of symptoms. Most physicians do not prescribe this very often because it may occasionally cause side effects that are much like the illness it is supposed to be helping and it is often difficult to be confident that the illness being treated is really Influenza A. It won't work with Influenza B and the other respiratory viruses at all.

All human beings will have Influenza quite a few times during their lifetimes. It is a miserable experience but not serious. Influenza shots may help protect you from getting Influenza A (but not Influenza B, Parainfluenza and other respiratory viruses that cause similar symptoms and there are about 200 of these). For people who have asthma or other chronic diseases (especially lung diseases) a Flu shot is strongly recommended. It will not help the Flu once the symptoms have started but it could prevent it next year. Flu shots are given in the Fall.

Take it easy when you have the Flu. Most of what your grandmother had to say about it is true and there are no breakthrough medicines that will cure the symptoms. Antibiotics do not help at all and may cause side effects. You may return to work or school when the fever is gone for about 24 hours.

