

Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

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What is Influenza?

Influenza is a viral infection that typically circulates mainly during the fall and winter months. While people often use the term “flu” to describe any kind of mild illness, such as a cold or stomach virus, the real influenza is different. It produces symptoms that are typically more serious than the common cold and sticks around longer.

There’s a lot more to influenza than meets the eye!

What causes influenza?

The flu is usually caused by influenza viruses A and B. There are different strains of the flu virus every year. These viruses mutate and change which is why there is a new flu vaccine each year.

What are the symptoms?

Some common symptoms of influenza are:

- Fever or feeling feverish
- Chills and shivering
- Body aches
- Headaches
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Fatigue, tiredness and weakness

Symptoms of influenza usually present between one and four days after being around someone with the virus. Then, the symptoms can be at their worst for three or four days before starting to feel better. It can take one to two weeks to completely recover.

Most people get better without problems. But sometimes influenza can lead to a bacterial infection such as an ear infection, sinus infection, or bronchitis. Less often, and in the most serious cases, influenza can lead to pneumonia.

How do people get Influenza?

Influenza spreads primarily through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. You can also contract the flu by touching a surface or object contaminated with the virus and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes.

Influenza vs. the Common Cold

Influenza can be mistaken for a severe cold because some symptoms are similar. However, there are key differences:

- Onset: the flu comes on suddenly, while a cold usually develops more gradually
- Severity: the flu is often more severe and can lead to complications like pneumonia
- Fever: a high fever is more common with the flu than with a cold
- Duration: flu symptoms typically last one to two weeks, while cold symptoms usually resolve within a few days
- Complications: Influenza can lead to serious complications, especially in vulnerable populations like the elderly, young children, and those with weakened immune systems.

Who is at risk?

Certain people are at higher risk of problems from influenza, including young children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with long-term illnesses or with impaired immune systems making it hard to fight infection.

Prevention

The best way to prevent the flu is by getting an annual flu vaccine. It is especially important for those at high risk of complications. Additionally, you can help prevent influenza transmission by frequent handwashing and covering your mouth and nose when you sneeze or cough. Stay healthy this season by practicing good hygiene and by staying informed.