



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

The Flu (Influenza)

This information explains the flu (influenza), including how it's spread and how you can lower your risk of getting it.

What is the flu?

The flu is caused by a virus (germ) that affects your respiratory system (your nose, throat, and lungs) and can cause infection.

The flu can be a serious illness for people with cancer or other diseases, and for those with weakened immune systems. Your immune system is made up of cells, tissues, and organs that help your body fight off illness. Cancer and cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy, can weaken your immune system. This can make it hard for you to fight off the flu and may put you at a higher risk for other issues if you get sick with the flu.

What are the signs of the flu?

If you have the flu, you may have 1 or more of the signs below:

- Fever (a temperature above 100.4° F (38° C), or as directed by your healthcare provider)
- Sore throat
- Chills
- Cough
- Headache
- Runny nose
- Body aches
- Tiredness and general discomfort

If you think you have the flu, call your doctor right away.

How does the flu spread?

The flu spreads through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of someone who is infected. The droplets carrying the virus are released into the air when the infected person coughs or sneezes. You can easily inhale (breathe in) these droplets and get an infection.

The flu can also spread when these droplets fall onto furniture, equipment, or other surfaces. If you touch the surface and then touch your nose, mouth, or eyes, you could be infected.

What can I do to lower my risk of getting the flu or passing it on to others?

- Get the flu vaccine (shot) every year. Your healthcare provider will let you know if it's safe for you to have a flu shot.
- Ask family members and close friends to get the flu vaccine.
- Always cough or sneeze into a tissue or your elbow, not your hand.
- Wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer often, especially after coughing sneezing. Use our resource *Hand Hygiene and Preventing Infection* to learn how to clean your hands properly.
- Don't share items such as cups, drinking glasses, food utensils, or toys.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who has cold or flu symptoms.
- Avoid close contact with others until your flu symptoms go away if you have it.

There are antiviral medications you can take that can help prevent or lessen your flu symptoms. Your doctor can prescribe these for you. These medicines shouldn't replace a yearly flu vaccine.

What happens if I'm in the hospital and I have the flu?

If you have the flu while you're in the hospital, we will need to follow special safety measures to stop the infection from spreading from person to person.

If you have the flu while you're in the hospital:

- You will be placed in a private room.
- A sign will be posted on your door telling all staff and visitors to clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before going into and after leaving your room.
- All staff and visitors will need to wear a mask, yellow gown, and gloves while in your room. These are available outside of your room.
- If you leave your room for tests, you must wear a mask, yellow gown, and gloves.
- You won't be able to walk around your unit, or go to the following areas of the hospital:
 - Pantry on your unit
 - Recreation center on M15
 - Pediatric recreation areas on M9 and the Pediatric Ambulatory Care Center (PACC)
 - Cafeteria
 - Main lobby
 - Any other public area of the hospital
 - You can have art or massage therapy in your room while following these safety measures.

You can stop following these safety measures when you can no longer pass the infection to others. Your healthcare team will let you know when it's safe to do so.

I have the flu. What should I do when I go to my outpatient appointments?

- When you check in for an appointment, let the reception staff know if you have any signs of the flu, such as a fever, cough, runny nose, or sneezing.
 - If you do have the flu, a staff member will bring you to a private room, where a nurse will ask you more about your symptoms.
 - If there are no private rooms available, a staff member will ask you to wear a mask over your mouth and nose in the waiting area to stop the infection from spreading to others.
- If you have signs of the flu, don't sit in the waiting area without a mask, eat in the cafeteria, or visit people who are staying in the hospital.
- If you feel too sick to come in for your appointment, be sure to call your doctor right away to reschedule.
- If your caregiver has the flu or any signs of the flu, they shouldn't go to your appointments with you. This is so they don't spread the infection to you or others.

Where can I get more information about the flu?

If you have any questions, speak with your doctor or nurse. You can also visit the following websites for more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/flu

New York State Department of Health

www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/influenza/seasona

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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