Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

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 and can cause infection. Your respiratory system includes your nose, throat, and lungs.

The flu can be a serious illness for people with cancer or other diseases. It can also be serious for people 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. It may also put you at a higher risk for other issues if you get sick with the flu.

Is it safe to get a flu shot and the COVID-19 vaccine at the same time?

Yes, it's safe to get the COVID-19 vaccine and other vaccines with your flu shot. You don't need to wait any length of time between them. It's important to protect yourself from both COVID-19 and the flu.

What are the signs of the flu?

If you have the flu, you may have one or more of these symptoms:

- A fever above 100.4 °F (38 °C) or as directed by your healthcare provider
- Sore throat
- Chills

- Cough
- Breathing problems (such as shortness of breath or chest tightness)
- Headache
- Runny nose
- Body aches
- Tiredness and general discomfort

Many symptoms of the flu are the same as COVID-19. If you think you have these symptoms, call your healthcare provider right away.

How does the flu spread?

The flu spreads through contact with droplets from an infected person's nose and throat. The infected person releases droplets carrying the virus into the air when they cough or sneeze. You can easily inhale (breathe in) these droplets and get an infection.

The flu can also spread when these droplets fall onto surfaces around an infected person. 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 your flu shot every year.
- Ask family members and close friends to get their flu shot.
- Always cough or sneeze into a tissue or your elbow, not your hand.
- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer often, especially after coughing or sneezing. Read our resource *Hand Hygiene and Preventing Infection* (www.mskcc.org/pe/hand-hygiene) to learn how to clean your hands properly.
- Don't share items such as cups, drinking glasses, eating utensils, or toys.

- Avoid close contact with anyone who has cold or flu symptoms.
- If you have the flu, avoid close contact with others until your flu symptoms go away.

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

Where can I get the flu shot?

You can get your flu shot at your local pharmacy. Visit www.vaccinefinder.org to find a location offering flu shots near you. If you're a patient at Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK), you can also get your flu shot at an MSK location. Call your healthcare provider to schedule an appointment.

When should I get my flu shot?

We recommend getting your flu shot in September or October. It's always a good time to get your flu shot, but getting it as early as possible can help protect you throughout the flu season.

Will I get the flu from the flu shot?

No, flu shots don't cause the flu. The most common side effects from the flu shot are soreness, redness, tenderness, and swelling in the area where you got your shot.

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'll follow special safety measures to stop the infection from spreading.

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

- You'll be moved to a private room.

- Anyone entering your room will need to clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before going into and after leaving your room. There will be a sign on your door as a reminder.
- Anyone entering your room will need to wear a mask, yellow gown, and gloves while in your room. These are available outside of your room. There will be a sign on your door as a reminder.
- 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?

- You'll need to wear a mask over your mouth and nose during your entire appointment.
- When you check in for your appointment, reception staff will ask you about

your symptoms. If you have any symptoms, a staff member will bring you to a private room. There, a healthcare provider will ask you more questions about your symptoms to help you get the care you need.

- To keep patients and staff safe and healthy, we may change our visitor policy more often than usual. Visit www.mskcc.org/visit for the most up-to-date information.
- If you feel too sick to come in for your appointment, call your healthcare provider right away to reschedule. You can also schedule a video visit instead. For more information about video visits, read our resource *Video Visits at MSK* (www.mskcc.org/pe/video-visits-msk).

Where can I get more information about the flu?

If you have any questions, talk with your healthcare provider. 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/flu

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

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

The Flu (Influenza) - Last updated on June 25, 2026
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center