

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# SEASONAL FLU

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

## **What is seasonal flu?**

Seasonal flu is a disease of the body's breathing system, including the nose, throat and lungs. Flu is short for "influenza." Seasonal flu is caused by a virus. In New England, the yearly flu season usually begins in late fall and lasts through March. Seasonal flu is a little different from "H1N1" flu, which was first recognized during April of 2009 and quickly spread to many parts of the world (becoming a "pandemic" or global outbreak). But seasonal flu causes symptoms that are similar to H1N1 flu, is spread like H1N1 flu, and can be prevented like H1N1 flu.

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

The most common symptoms of flu are fever, cough, and sore throat. Symptoms can also include body aches, headache, chills, runny nose and feeling very tired. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. Symptoms last from a few days to up to a week or more.

## **Is seasonal flu serious?**

Yes, seasonal flu can be very serious. Every year in the U.S. seasonal flu causes thousands of hospital admissions and deaths. Some people are at higher risk of serious health problems when they get the flu. This includes pregnant women, infants, the elderly and people with medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and weakened immune systems.

## **How does seasonal flu spread?**

The flu virus is in the wet spray (droplets of saliva and mucus) that comes out of the nose and mouth of someone who coughs or sneezes. If you are close enough to a person with the flu (3 - 6 feet) when they cough or sneeze, you can breathe in the virus and get sick. Flu symptoms start 1 - 4 days (usually 2 days) after a person breathes in the virus.

Flu is spread easily from person to person. The virus can also live for a short time on things you touch like doorknobs, phones and toys. After you touch these objects, you can catch the virus when you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. Adults with seasonal flu can spread it from about one day before symptoms appear to about one week after. Children can spread the flu even longer after they get sick.

## **How is seasonal flu treated?**

There are drugs available that your doctor may prescribe to treat seasonal flu. The drugs work best if started soon after the start of symptoms. Your doctor can determine if you need treatment.

People sick with any type of flu should make sure to drink plenty of fluids, get plenty of rest, eat healthy foods, wash their hands frequently and stay home to avoid spreading the flu to other people. Over the counter pain relievers may help people with the flu feel more comfortable. Children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin, because a rare but serious disease called Reye syndrome can occur.

## **Is there a vaccine for seasonal flu?**

Yes. A vaccine helps your body to protect itself against a disease. There are two types of vaccines for seasonal flu: the flu shot (given with a needle injection, usually in the arm) and the nasal-spray (a spray that is inhaled through the nose). Vaccine is the best way to protect yourself against seasonal flu. Getting flu vaccine will **not** give you the flu or any other type of illness.

## Who should get seasonal flu vaccine?

In general, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting seasonal flu can get vaccinated. It is especially important that the people listed below get a flu shot every year.

- Children age 6 months up to their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and weakened immune systems.
- People who live in nursing homes and other long term care facilities
- Anyone who might transmit flu to someone at risk. For example, health care workers, direct care staff, and people who live with or care for anyone on the list above.

## How do I know if I have seasonal flu?

If you have symptoms of flu, it could be seasonal or H1N1 flu. If you think you have the flu, stay home from work and school and avoid contact with others so you do not spread the virus. If you think you might have flu and you need to see your doctor, call ahead and let them know you might have the flu. That way, your doctor's office can take steps to avoid the spread of flu to others. The doctor may recommend that you be tested for flu.

## How can I prevent getting seasonal flu?

- Get seasonal flu vaccine every year especially if you have a condition which makes health complications from the flu more likely.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into the inside of your elbow if you don't have a tissue. Throw tissues away and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Use a household cleaner to clean things that are touched often, like door knobs, toys, phones and faucets.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick. Try to stay at least 3-6 feet from someone who is sick with the flu.
- People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid large crowds, if possible.
- **Stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin).** For most people this will mean staying at home for about 4 days.

## How do I take care of someone who is sick with seasonal flu?

*Flu: What You Can Do - Caring for People At Home* is a booklet available in nine languages that gives you lots of information to help you care for someone who has the flu in their home. A video is also available in English and Spanish. *Flu: What You Can Do* information can be found at: [www.mass.gov/flu](http://www.mass.gov/flu)

## Where can I get more information?

- Call your doctor, nurse or clinic, or your local board of health
- Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Immunization Program at: (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at: [www.mass.gov/flu](http://www.mass.gov/flu)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at: [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)
- Mass 2-1-1 provides flu information for the general public: call 211 or 1-877-211-MASS (6277)

For flu clinic information, visit the MassPRO Public Flu Clinic Finder website at: [flu.masspro.org/](http://flu.masspro.org/)