

Influenza: Care Guidelines

Following these care guidelines will help you as you recover from the flu (influenza).

If you have any questions or concerns, please ask your care team.

What to expect

During the first few days of the flu, you may have a fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and feel very tired. Some of these signs, such as a cough, may last longer. However, with the right care, most people begin to feel better after 5 to 7 days.

Here are some ways to help you recover and avoid spreading the flu to others.

Ways to take care of yourself

Activity

Try to get as much rest as you can. As you begin to feel better, slowly increase your activity, but do not become overtired. Plan to rest during the day.

Stay home and limit your contact with others. This will help prevent the flu from spreading and speed your recovery. Also be sure to:

- Clean your hands often with either soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it. If you do not have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your shirt sleeve instead of your hands. Clean your hands after you throw the tissue away.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose and mouth.

After 24 hours with no fever (and without using medication to reduce the fever), you may return to work or school.

Diet

Drink clear fluids such as water, broth, sports drinks and pediatric electrolyte drinks.

Medications

For adults

If you have a sore throat, try gargling with warm salt water. Mix 1/4 teaspoon of salt with 1/2 cup (4 ounces) of warm water.

If your physician prescribed an antiviral medication such as oseltamivir phosphate (Tamiflu®) or zanamivir (Relenza®), start taking it as soon as you can. These medications work best when you take them during the first 2 days of the flu. Be sure to finish taking all of the medication, even if you feel better.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) can help relieve fever and aching. You may also use over-the-counter cold and flu medications, but they may contain acetaminophen. Do not take more than 4,000 milligrams (mg) of acetaminophen total in 24 hours. Be sure to read labels carefully.

Talk with your physician about the 24-hour limit of acetaminophen that is right for you. If you are fasting or undernourished, have diabetes, are taking isoniazid, or frequently drink alcohol, you may need to limit acetaminophen to 2,000 to 3,000 mg per day in divided doses. It is possible your physician may tell you not to take acetaminophen at all.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (Motrin®, Advil®, Nuprin®), can help you feel more comfortable. Check with your physician before taking an NSAID if you have kidney disease or stomach problems.

Anyone younger than 18 years should never use aspirin or medications that contain aspirin (like Pepto-Bismol®) when they have the flu. Aspirin may cause Reye's syndrome, a rare disease that causes liver failure and can cause death.

For children

When caring for children who are ill, always follow their physician's guidelines for giving medications. This includes prescribed and over-the-counter medications.

When to call the physician

If you notice any of these symptoms, contact your physician right way. If you cannot reach the physician, go to the nearest emergency department.

In children

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Very irritable and does not want to be held
- Fever and cough return after flu-like symptoms improve
- Fever
 - Temperature more than 100 degrees F in children 2 months old or younger
 - Temperature more than 100 degrees F lasting more than 3 days in children older than 2 months
- Severe vomiting or vomiting that does not stop; cannot keep liquids down for more than 12 hours
- Signs of dehydration (dry mouth, decreased urine output, feeling weak, sunken eyes)
- A baby with a dry diaper (no urine) for 8 hours

In adults

- Problems breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe vomiting or vomiting that does not stop; cannot keep liquids down for more than 24 hours
- Headache that gets worse; stiff neck or confusion
- Little or no urine output in 24 hours
- Fever and cough return after flu-like symptoms improve
- Flu symptoms become worse or last for more than 7 days