



## Influenza

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# Influenza

**Influenza**, also known as “flu,” is a common respiratory infection that can be severe and even life-threatening. Each year more than 36,000 persons, especially older individuals and those with chronic medical conditions, die from influenza in the United States. The February 23, 2005, issue of *JAMA* includes an article that evaluates the accuracy of diagnosing influenza. This Patient Page is adapted from one previously published in the November 3, 2004, issue of *JAMA*.

## SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS OF INFLUENZA

- Fever—often a high temperature of more than 102° Fahrenheit (38.9° Celsius)
- Headache
- Muscle aches and pains
- Chills
- Cough
- **Pleuritic** chest pain (pain when you take a breath)

Gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, are rare in adults with influenza. What is sometimes called “stomach flu” is actually not caused by the flu virus. The medical term for that common condition is **gastroenteritis**.

## FLU VS COLDS

Colds are also viral infections but are usually self-limited and not life-threatening. Colds usually cause a stuffy or runny nose, sore throat, mild cough, and sometimes mild fever.

## TREATING INFLUENZA

Because influenza is a viral infection, it cannot be treated with antibacterial antibiotics. Several antiviral prescription medications are available that may help treat influenza. These medications work best if they are taken early in the course of the flu. They may help decrease the length of symptoms of influenza. These drugs cause some adverse effects, and persons with some chronic medical problems should not take them, nor should pregnant women. They are not recommended for children younger than 1 year. Medications for pain and fever may also be helpful in relieving flu symptoms.

## PREVENTING INFLUENZA

Receiving flu vaccine each year is the best way to prevent influenza. Yearly vaccinations against influenza are recommended particularly for everyone aged 65 years and older, pregnant women, individuals with chronic medical problems (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), health care workers, individuals who care for children or elderly persons, all children aged 6 to 23 months, and older children who have chronic medical conditions or who are receiving chronic aspirin therapy. Children 8 years and younger receiving the flu vaccine for the first time should receive 2 doses given about 30 days apart.

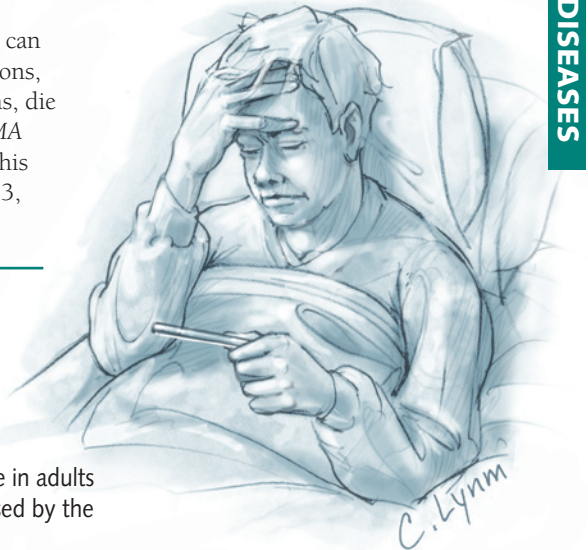
The flu shot is made from inactivated influenza virus and cannot give you the flu. Because influenza virus strains differ from year to year, the influenza vaccine also varies each year. A nasal spray flu vaccine is available for healthy persons aged 5 through 49 years who are not pregnant.

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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
800/232-2522  
www.cdc.gov
- American Lung Association  
800/LUNGUSA (586-4872)  
www.lungusa.org

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on *JAMA*'s Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). A Patient Page on flu vaccine was published in the October 4, 2000, issue.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Institute on Aging; American Lung Association; National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

