

Patient information factsheet

Influenza and respiratory viruses

A respiratory virus is an illness that infects the respiratory (breathing) system. There are a wide variety of different respiratory viruses, but the most well-known is influenza (commonly known as 'flu').

Respiratory viruses can affect any age group, but they can lead to further illness in children, the elderly and people with weaker immune systems.

Symptoms

The most common symptoms of flu are:

- a fever (high temperature)
- shivering
- headache
- sore throat
- muscle aches
- a dry cough

Symptoms can last for up to five days in adults and seven days in children.

Other respiratory viruses include:

- respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)
- para influenza viruses
- adenoviruses
- human metapneumovirus
- coronaviruses

These can all cause symptoms of a high temperature, a cough and a runny nose.

Cold or flu?

You can tell the difference between flu and the common cold by their symptoms.

The symptoms of the common cold are much milder, including:

- a runny nose
- sneezing
- watery eyes
- throat irritation

Flu can make you feel so exhausted and unwell that you have to stay in bed and rest until you feel better.

How do respiratory viruses spread?

Respiratory viruses spread easily from one person to another. When someone with a virus coughs or sneezes, the virus can travel in droplets to other people nearby.

It can also spread when people touch surfaces that have been contaminated with the virus and then touch their mouth, nose or eyes. The flu virus can live on surfaces like door knobs and telephones for up to 24 hours.

If you have flu or another respiratory virus, make sure that you:

- cover your nose and mouth if you sneeze or cough (preferably with a tissue)
- put used tissues in a bin
- wash your hands or use alcohol hand gel regularly, and always after coughing, sneezing or touching contaminated objects or surfaces
- wipe surfaces regularly with disinfectant wipes.

Treating respiratory viruses

At home

If you have flu or another respiratory virus at home, you should:

- rest
- drink plenty of fluid
- take pain relief medication (such as paracetamol) if you need to

If you have a temperature, stay away from school, work, babies, young children and the elderly.

Most people get better without needing any treatment. Seek medical advice if your symptoms become more severe or last for more than about a week.

If you are pregnant or you have a chronic or long standing illness, and you develop symptoms of flu or another respiratory virus contact your GP for advice.

In hospital

In some cases, we may need to treat your respiratory virus in hospital. This may be because your symptoms become more severe or lead to further illness, or because you develop the symptoms while you are being treated in hospital for another condition.

In hospital we will take a nasal (nose) swab or a throat sample to test for flu and other respiratory viruses. If you have flu and are coughing, we may give you a bed in a single room so that the virus doesn't spread to other patients, staff and visitors.

The healthcare team may wear masks, gloves and aprons when caring for you. If you need to leave your side room (for example, to go for an x-ray), we may ask you to wear a mask while you are outside the room.

If you have flu, we may prescribe you oseltamivir (known by the brand name 'Tamiflu') or zanamivir ('Relenza'). These treatments work best if you start them in the first two days of having symptoms.

We may also give you oseltamivir if you have been in contact with someone with flu and are at high risk of developing complications (if you have a respiratory, heart or immune condition, for example).

Flu vaccination

The best way to protect yourself against flu is to have the flu vaccination each winter. If you are at high risk of infection, make sure you have your vaccination every year.

The hospital provides flu vaccinations for staff each winter to reduce the risk of flu spreading.

Useful links

Public Health England: www.gov.uk/government/collections/annual-flu-programme

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a member of staff on the ward.

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.