



Frequently asked questions: Influenza (flu) information for parents

2020/2021

Version 1.8

September 8th, 2020

Who is this advice for?

The following advice is for parents of children and for students in all educational institutions including:

- crèches,
- childcare,
- schools,
- third level institutions

We are now in our annual flu season and influenza A and B viruses are circulating in the community. Influenza is usually referred to as 'flu' and the term flu will be used throughout the document.

What are the symptoms of flu?

The symptoms of flu include:

- Rapid onset of temperature of 38°C/100°F or over **and** some of the following symptoms:
 - Dry cough
 - Sore throat
 - Muscle aches and pains
 - Headache
 - Runny nose
 - Severe weakness and fatigue
 - Vomiting/diarrhoea (in some cases)

What are the differences between flu and the common cold?

It can sometimes be difficult to tell the difference between the common cold and flu. The main difference is that the **symptoms of flu come on quickly** and there are usually muscle aches and a fever. The common cold starts more slowly with a runny nose and sneezing. For a full list of differences between flu and the common cold, please see the table below.

Symptoms	Influenza (Flu)	Common Cold
Onset	Rapid	Slow
Fever	Typically high ($\geq 38^{\circ}\text{C}$ or 100°F)	Rare
Headache	Usual	Rare
General aches and pains	Usual, often severe	Rare
Fatigue, weakness	Can be prolonged for a number of weeks	Quite mild
Extreme exhaustion	Early and marked	Never
Runny nose	Common	Common
Sneezing	Common	Usual
Sore throat	Common	Common
Cough	Common, can be severe	Mild to moderate, hacking cough
Diarrhoea, vomiting	Sometimes	Not associated with the common cold in adults

How does flu spread?

- Flu virus spreads from person-to-person mainly through the coughing or sneezing of a sick person.
- Flu virus may also be spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with the virus (for example a tissue or door handle touched by the infected person) and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.
- Flu can also spread by direct contact such as skin-to-skin contact or oral contact with an infected person.

Is flu dangerous?

Most people infected with the flu virus have a mild to moderate illness, but some have more severe illness especially those with underlying illness such as lung disease, heart disease, weakened immune systems etc.

What should I do as a parent?

1. Be aware of the symptoms of flu as outlined above and know when and where to seek medical care. See below.
2. If your child is sick they should always stay at home from school when they have symptoms. If they have flu they should stay away from the crèche/school/educational institution until they are well enough to

return, usually 5 to 7 days after symptom onset. They should not return to school if they have a fever i.e. temperature $\geq 38^{\circ}\text{C}/100^{\circ}\text{F}$.

3. Teach your children the following **good health habits** to help stop the spread of germs:
 - Teach your children to cover their mouth and nose with a paper tissue when coughing or sneezing. If no tissue is available they should cough or sneeze into the inside of their elbow. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself.
 - Teach your children to use a tissue only once and dispose of it (get rid of it) quickly and carefully (a dustbin is fine).
 - Teach your children to wash their hands frequently with soap and water. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself. If they do not have access to hand washing facilities give them alcohol hand gel to use.
 - Teach your children to avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth.
 - Teach your children to stay at least 1 metre/3 feet away from people who are sick.
 - Wash hard surfaces such as kitchen worktops, door handles, etc with a normal household cleaner as the virus can live on these surfaces. Do this frequently.

What should I do as a student?

1. Be aware of the symptoms of flu as outlined above and know when and where to seek medical care. See below.
2. If you are sick, always stay at home from school/college when you have symptoms. If they have flu, you should stay away from school/college until you are well enough to return, usually 5 to 7 days after symptom onset. You should not return to school if you have a fever i.e. temperature $\geq 38^{\circ}\text{C}/100^{\circ}\text{F}$.
3. Be aware of the following **good health habits** to help stop the spread of germs:
 - Cover your mouth and nose with a paper tissue when coughing or sneezing. If no tissue is available, cough or sneeze into the inside of your elbow. Use the tissue only once and dispose of it (get rid of it) quickly and carefully (a dustbin is fine).
 - Wash your hands frequently with soap and water. If you do not have access to hand washing facilities use alcohol hand gel
 - Avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth.
 - Stay at least 1 metre/3 feet away from people who are sick.
 - Wash hard surfaces such as kitchen worktops, door handles, etc. with a normal household cleaner as the virus can live on these surfaces. Do this frequently.

What should I do if my child gets sick?

If your child gets sick with a flu-like illness as described above you should:

- Keep your child at home and away from others as much as is possible to avoid spreading infection to others. If they are sick with flu they should stay at home until they are well enough to return, usually 5 to 7

days after symptoms start. They should not return to school if they have a fever i.e. temperature $\geq 38^{\circ}\text{C}/100^{\circ}\text{F}$.

- Give your child simple anti-fever medication such as paracetamol and/or ibuprofen (NB: aspirin should NOT be given to children under 16 years of age) and ensure that they drink plenty of fluids.
- If you think your child needs to see the GP because they have severe symptoms or their symptoms aren't clearing, remember to ring your GP first.
- If your child is in a high-risk group for complications of flu contact your GP, even if their symptoms are mild (high risk groups include people with: chronic lung, heart, kidney, liver, or neurological disease; immunosuppression (i.e. weakened immune system whether caused by disease or treatment); diabetes mellitus; people aged 65 years and older; children less than 2 years of age; children with any condition (e.g. spinal cord injury, seizure disorder or other neuromuscular disorder) that can compromise lung function, especially those attending special schools/day centres, persons with Down syndrome, people on medication for asthma, severely obese people (BMI ≥ 40), pregnant women and people with haemoglobinopathies)
- Teach your child **good health habits**, as above.
- Make sure that all household surfaces that are touched by hands are kept clean, especially bedside tables, surfaces in bathrooms and kitchens and children's toys. Such surfaces should be wiped regularly with a household disinfectant according to directions on the product label.

Advice for students if they get sick

If you get sick with flu or flu-like illness

- Stay at home and away from others as much as is possible to avoid spreading infection to others. If you are sick with flu you should stay at home until you are well enough to return, usually 5 to 7 days after symptom onset. You should not return to school/college if you have a fever i.e. temperature $\geq 38^{\circ}\text{C}/100^{\circ}\text{F}$.
- Take anti-fever medication such as paracetamol and/or ibuprofen (NB: aspirin should NOT be given to children under 16 years of age) and ensure that you drink plenty of fluids.
- If you think you need to see the GP because you have severe symptoms or your symptoms aren't clearing, remember to ring your GP first.
- If you are in a high-risk group for complications of flu contact your GP, even if their symptoms are mild (high risk groups include people with: chronic lung, heart, kidney, liver, or neurological disease; immunosuppression (i.e. weakened immune system whether caused by disease or treatment); diabetes mellitus; people aged 65 years and older; children less than 2 years of age; children with any condition (e.g. spinal cord injury, seizure disorder or other neuromuscular disorder) that can compromise lung function, especially those attending special schools/day centres, persons with Down syndrome, people on

medication for asthma, severely obese people (BMI ≥ 40), pregnant women and people with haemoglobinopathies)

- Make sure that all household surfaces that are touched by hands are kept clean, especially bedside tables, surfaces in bathrooms and kitchens and children's toys. Such surfaces should be wiped regularly with a household disinfectant according to directions on the product label.

Should educational institutions (crèches, schools, third level institutes) be doing anything to prevent the spread of flu?

Yes, like parents, educational institutions should encourage and facilitate everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like flu including:

- Children/students should cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. If no tissue is available they should cough or sneeze into the inside of their elbow. Children/students should use a tissue only once and dispose of it quickly and carefully (a bin is fine). This is known as respiratory etiquette.
- Children/students should wash their hands frequently with soap and water. Where soap and water is not readily available alcohol-based hand gel can be used.
- Children/students should avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth.
- Wash hard surfaces such as kitchen worktops, door handles, etc frequently with a normal household cleaner as the virus can live on these.

Educational institutions should put up posters on respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene and ensure that children/students have access to suitable hand washing facilities. Posters can be found on the HPSC website as indicated below.

Is there a vaccine against seasonal influenza (flu)?

Yes there is. A vaccine is an injection which prevents a person getting a particular disease. It works by strengthening the body's immune system.

Vaccination against flu is recommended for people at high risk of complications. Your GP will provide you with advice and information on this.

Who should get the seasonal influenza vaccine (flu vaccine)?

1. Those aged 65 years or older.
2. Adults and children over 6 months of age with chronic illness requiring regular medical follow-up e.g. chronic heart disease, chronic liver disease, chronic neurological disease (including multiple sclerosis and hereditary and degenerative disorders of the central nervous system), chronic renal failure chronic respiratory disease (including cystic fibrosis, moderate or severe asthma, and bronchopulmonary dysplasia), diabetes mellitus, haemoglobinopathies

3. Those with immunosuppression (weakened immune system) due to disease or treatment, including asplenia (no spleen) or splenic dysfunction.
4. Those with any condition that can compromise lung function (e.g. spinal cord injury, seizure disorder, or other neuromuscular disorder) especially those attending special schools/day centres.
5. Those with Down syndrome.
6. Children with moderate to severe neurodevelopmental disorders such as cerebral palsy and intellectual disability.
7. Children on long-term aspirin therapy (because of the risk of Reyes syndrome).
8. Those with morbid obesity i.e. Body mass index ≥ 40 .
9. Residents of nursing homes, old people's homes, and other long stay facilities where rapid spread is likely to follow introduction of infection
10. Those likely to transmit flu to a person at high risk for flu complications such as:
 - a. Health Care Workers, both for their own protection and for the protection of patients who may have a suboptimal response to influenza vaccinations
 - b. Household contacts of at-risk persons.
 - c. Out-of-home care givers to at-risk persons.
11. All pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy.
12. Those who have close, regular contact with pigs, poultry or water fowl.

Are there medicines to treat flu?

Yes, there are medicines known as anti-virals that can be used to treat flu. However, as most cases of flu will be mild, anti-viral treatment will only be necessary in a small proportion of cases. Doctors will assess each case but the following groups are the ones most likely to require treatment with anti-virals:

- Patients who appear to have severe symptoms or
- Patients who are in defined high risk groups as above.

Further information

Posters: <http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/influenza/seasonalinfluenza/infectioncontroladvice/respiratoryhygiene/posters/>

Guidance on seasonal influenza:

<http://www.hpsc.ie/A-Z/Respiratory/Influenza/SeasonalInfluenza/>

Guidance on influenza vaccination

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/pubinfo/flu-vaccination/about-the-vaccine/>