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# Factsheet on seasonal influenza

## What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza (flu) is an illness caused by a virus. Flu viruses are always changing, so this winter's flu will be slightly different from last winter's.

## How is flu spread?

Flu is spread through the coughs, sneezes and the hands of people who are already infected with the virus. It can spread very rapidly.

## How do I know if I have flu – what are the symptoms?

A lot of people confuse flu with a heavy cold. But flu has additional symptoms that you do not get with a cold, these include:

- a high temperature/ fever
- aching limbs
- no energy
- a 'shivery' feeling
- a headache
- Cough

What also makes flu different from a cold is that it usually starts suddenly and symptoms will develop 24 – 48 hours after exposure to the virus.

## How long does flu last?

You may feel ill and have a temperature for up to a week, but you could feel weak and extremely lethargic for several weeks longer.

You will be infectious for around 7 days after your symptoms first appear.

## How serious is flu?

For most people flu is a nasty experience. For some people though, flu can lead to more serious illnesses such as bronchitis and pneumonia that may require hospital treatment. For those most at risk of serious complications of flu, there is a vaccine available which offers them some protection, and these people should have a flu vaccination every year.

The Department of Health advises you to have a flu vaccination if you:

- are 65 years of age or over;
- have a chronic underlying illness - if in doubt, ask your doctor or practice nurse
- are a pregnant women
- have lowered immunity due to disease or treatment such as high dose steroid medication or cancer treatment
- live in a long stay residential care homes or a long stay facility
- are recipients of 'carers allowance' or are a main carer
- provide frontline health or social care

### **What should I do if I get flu?**

You can take pain killers to help relieve the headache and muscle pains and reduce your temperature. In special circumstances specific antiviral drugs may be prescribed.

The best way to manage flu is to:

- stay at home, keep warm and rest - this will help you recover more quickly in the long run
- drink plenty of non-alcoholic liquids to replace the fluid lost in sweating
- eat what you can
- practice good respiratory hygiene – “Catch it, Bin it, Kill it”
- practice good hand hygiene (using warm water and liquid soap)

### **Should I contact my doctor?**

If you are just worried, it is best to discuss your symptoms over the phone rather than making an appointment to see the doctor.

Alternatively, you can contact NHS 111 for advice. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

If you live on your own, tell a family member, friend or neighbour you are ill so that they can check on you.

### **Can I avoid getting flu?**

It is difficult to avoid flu if there is an epidemic, but:

- People with flu should stay at home to avoid infecting other people
- People in risk groups should be vaccinated every year

## **What about helping others?**

Be a good neighbour:

- watch out for signs that a neighbour may be ill - for example, milk bottles left on the doorstep or curtains closed during the daytime
- offer to make drinks or do some shopping for a sick neighbour if they live alone or if you think they may not be able to cope

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This factsheet has been reviewed by a multi-disciplinary team from the North West.

Further advice may be obtained from Cumbria and Lancashire Public Health England Centre. Telephone 0844 225 0602