

Flu Season: What You Need to Know to Stay Healthy

*By Ralph Morris, MD, MPH
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Flu season has arrived. Although we can't predict how severe it will be, we know that last season was deadlier than many of the recent past. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) website](#) reports annual flu deaths in the U.S. range between approximately 12,000 and 56,000 people. During the 2017-2018 flu season, however, approximately 80,000 Americans died, the highest number of flu-related deaths in 40 years ([report](#) on Associated Press interview with CDC).

Here are some smart steps you can take to help stay healthy this flu season:

- **Get a flu shot!** Flu shots are recommended for everyone at least six months old and sufficiently healthy. (Speak to your doctor if you have any doubts or questions.) There are a variety of shots, or [vaccines](#), available to help your body fight the flu, including the standard vaccine, vaccines for older people, vaccines for people with egg allergies, and a nasal spray vaccine. It takes about two weeks for the body's immune system response to kick in fully, so for optimum coverage, aim to get a flu shot each year by Halloween. That said, later is better than never. According to [CDC](#), vaccination coverage among adults during the 2017-2018 season was only 37.1%, a decline of 6.2% over the previous season. That could help explain the high flu death statistic from last season. A [study](#) of children's flu-associated deaths shows the vaccine significantly reduces a child's risk of dying from the flu.
- **Avoid being around sick people.** Try to steer clear of people who have the flu. During flu season, refrain from large gatherings to help reduce your odds of being exposed to the virus. The CDC [FluView website](#) provides an interactive map of influenza activity estimates by state. The map is updated weekly so you can stay informed about flu activity in your area.
The flu virus resides in the back of the throat and nose of those infected. [Research](#) shows even the exhaled breath of flu sufferers can spread the virus. If you do get the flu, stay home and limit contact with others.
- **Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly and keep your hands away from your face.** The flu virus is good at "hitching a ride" from frequently touched surfaces to your mouth, eyes, or nose. Try to suspend this mode of flu transportation by washing your hands often and



Flu Vaccine Finder

Find flu clinics near you.
Everyone six months of age and older needs a flu vaccine.

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refraining from touching your face. When soap and water are not available, using hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol is recommended.

- **Disinfect frequently touched surfaces.** Door knobs, rails, handles and other commonly touched surfaces should be appropriately disinfected to help reduce your contact with virus particles. Clean surfaces first with detergent and water and then disinfect using ¼ cup of regular chlorine bleach (6% strength) mixed into 1 gallon of water. Air dry. Alternatively, wipe down surfaces with disposable pre-moistened wipes containing chlorine bleach.
- **Keep your immune system firing on all cylinders.** Maintain a healthy lifestyle, with adequate rest, nutrition, and exercise to bolster your body's natural defenses against the flu.

Flu Virus Dynamics

Flu, short for “influenza,” from the Italian term for “influence” (a reference to the belief that the illness is a product of the influence of the stars or the cold), is a type of seasonal respiratory viral infection that has probably affected humans for thousands of years. Scientists have ascertained that flu viruses are *zoonotic*, and have their origins in animals, including birds and other animals.

Flu viruses come in several forms and mutate regularly, which is why humans are so vulnerable. It is the medical experts' challenge to develop protective vaccines many months in advance of each new flu season. A flu pandemic, or worldwide outbreak, can ensue when a virus emerges that is very different from previous strains in humans. In that case, overall population immunity is low, and the virus spreads readily from person to person. Human history is punctuated with worldwide pandemic flu outbreaks such as the terrible [1918 Pandemic Flu](#), which killed over 500,000 people in the U.S., and at least 50 million worldwide. Other examples of pandemic flu include the “Asian Flu” of 1957 (116,000 U.S. deaths), the “Hong Kong Flu” of 1968 (100,000 U.S. deaths), and “Swine Flu” of 2009 (12,469 U.S. deaths).

Once a pandemic virus has been established, it can become a seasonal virus. For example, the 1918 Pandemic Flu virus, an H1N1 virus, continued to circulate the globe as a seasonal virus for 38 years after the pandemic ended.

“Man and Microbes” author Arno Karlen¹ points out that flu is the only infectious disease that appears on the [CDC list](#) of the top ten leading causes of death in the U.S. Karlen aptly describes flu as *one of the world's worst yet least feared killers*. This flu season, take some smart steps to help avoid the flu.

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¹ Karlen, A. (1996). “Man and Microbes: Disease and Plagues in History and Modern Times,” Simon & Schuster, New York