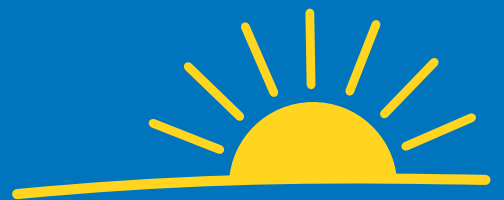


Information & Advice

Helping you to help yourself

Fight the Flu



Help the Aged



If you would like this leaflet in another format, such as large print or audio tape, please contact the Information Resources Team on **020 7278 1114**.

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Flu – an unwelcome winter visitor

Winter brings dark evenings and cold weather! It is also a time when we suffer more coughs and colds and there is the reappearance of another seasonal visitor, the unpleasant and much more serious illness, **influenza** or **flu**.

Flu is not new; it has been around for thousands of years. The worst outbreak in recent history was the epidemic of 1918-1919, when over 200,000 people died in this country alone. More recently, we have had the 'Asian' (1957), 'Hong Kong' (1968) and 'Red' (1977) flu to contend with. It is estimated that even in non-epidemic years, up to 4,000 people die from flu-related illnesses, and some years it is many more than this.

What is flu?

Flu is a highly infectious virus which first attacks the cells in your lungs and airways. Whilst it can be caught at any time of the year, the most common time is between December and March. Unlike other common viruses such as chickenpox or measles, there is not just one type of flu virus but several different types. These types are always changing, so getting flu once doesn't mean that you won't get it again.

How is flu spread?

Flu is spread through the droplets released into the air when a sufferer sneezes or coughs. You can catch the virus by breathing in these droplets or by having contact with surfaces where they have settled. Someone who has flu is usually infectious for about a week.

What are the symptoms of flu?

The typical symptoms of flu are a high temperature (103°F or 39.4°C) with:

- chills
- a cough
- sore throat
- general weakness
- painful muscles
- backache
- headache

The major difference between flu and the common cold is that you may be literally 'knocked flat' by flu and unable to do anything but go to bed until the worst of the illness has passed.

The main symptoms of flu generally last for about seven days. For some people, however, complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia will delay recovery.

Once the severe illness has passed, you may find that you still feel tired and unwell. This could last for several weeks.

Are you at risk from flu?

Anyone can get flu. Most people overcome the illness after a recovery period, but older people and people who are not well to begin with are more prone to serious complications that can follow a bout of flu.

Those who are considered to be at a **'high risk'** from flu include:

- **people aged 65 or over**
- people with respiratory disease such as bronchitis, asthma and emphysema
- people with heart, kidney or liver disease
- people with diabetes
- people whose immune system is weakened by disease or treatment
- residents of care homes or other long-stay care accommodation
- people who are the main carer for an older or disabled person

Whilst anyone can ask their doctor for a flu jab, the Department of Health recommends that everyone included in these 'high risk' groups should have a flu vaccination every year.

Prevention is better than cure

Flu can largely be prevented by vaccination. Vaccines are available every year from October, before flu usually



strikes. Unlike some vaccines that last for years or life, you must get a flu jab every year to stay protected.

The flu vaccine prevents the illness in about three quarters of those vaccinated. Even if you do catch flu, there is evidence that you will have it more mildly and with fewer complications than if you had not been vaccinated. Modern flu vaccines have few side effects – some people get a sore arm for a day or two.

Flu vaccine for people aged 65 or over

A bout of flu can lead to serious complications such as pneumonia or severe bronchitis. The risk of experiencing these complications increases with age. This is why flu vaccination is recommended for people aged 65 or over.

If you are 65 or over, talk to your doctor or practice nurse about vaccination.

As a further precaution, you may want to ask about the pneumococcal vaccine too. This is a one-off jab which protects you from the infection which causes pneumonia and other serious illnesses. Again, because the risk of this infection increases with age, the vaccine is recommended to people aged 65 or over.

Flu in care homes

It is important for older people living in care homes to be vaccinated against flu. They are at greater risk because the flu virus can spread quickly and easily when people in 'high risk' groups live together.

Are you going to get your flu jab this year?

Unfortunately not everyone over the age of 65 or in the other 'high risk' groups gets a vaccination. Here are some of the reasons people give for not having a jab.

"I'm not likely to get flu anyway."

Just because you have never had flu before doesn't mean that you won't get it this winter. There are many different strains of flu virus which change every year. A particularly nasty strain of the virus can make normally healthy people very ill. Similarly, because each winter's flu is slightly different from previous years, having flu once will not stop you getting it in the future.

"Even if I do get flu, I'll get over it."

Flu is a horrible experience for most people. If you are older or in one of the other 'high risk' groups you are more likely to get complications such as pneumonia or bronchitis which may put you in hospital. Unfortunately a lot of people die from flu every year, so why risk it?

"I'm worried about the side effects."

The most common side effect of a flu jab is a slightly sore arm where the vaccine was injected. The jab cannot give you flu as there is no live virus in the vaccine. But occasionally, some people find that they get a bit of a temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days after being vaccinated.

If you are still in two minds about having a flu jab, why not contact your practice nurse or doctor to talk it over with them?

Keep healthy during the winter

A healthy diet gives you energy, and helps to protect you against illness during the winter months. Try to take some regular exercise if you can – any kind of activity that gets the circulation going and helps you keep warm. If you smoke, think about giving up. For more information on diet and exercise, see our free advice leaflets 'Healthy Eating' and 'Keeping Mobile'.

It is also vitally important that your home is kept warm during the cold weather – living in a cold home can be a risk to your health. Our free advice leaflet 'Keep Out the Cold' gives information and advice on insulation and draughtproofing, making the most of your heating and dealing with bills.

What if you do catch flu?

Antibiotics are of no use in treating flu. However, they may be used to treat ear or chest infections, which can develop as a result of flu. To treat the symptoms of flu, you may find the following tips helpful.

- **Stay in bed** – rest as much as you can. This helps your body to fight the infection.
- **Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids.** You need to replace the liquid you lose through sweating.
- **Aspirin, paracetamol or anti-inflammatory drugs** such as ibuprofen can relieve headaches, muscle pains and fever. Ask your pharmacist for advice.

- **Cough medicines and decongestants** can be helpful. But if you are already taking other medications, whether prescribed or bought over the counter, always seek the advice of your pharmacist.
- If you feel very hot and feverish, sponging down with tepid water can reduce body temperature.
- Eat what you can.

If you are in one of the 'high risk' groups let your GP know as soon as possible if you think you may have flu.

You should also consult your doctor if you are concerned about your condition, if your symptoms do not improve in a week or if you experience:

- chest pain;
- severe earache; or
- wheezing or breathlessness.

It is a good idea to tell your friends or neighbours that you are feeling unwell so that they can check that you are OK and give you any help you need.



Recovering from flu

After a bout of flu, many people feel tired or under the weather for several weeks. If you feel like this, these simple measures may help to speed your recovery.

- Try to give up smoking while you feel ill. If you do give up smoking during the illness, try not to start again.
- Try not to have late nights.
- Try not to have too much alcohol.
- Whilst you may not feel up to vigorous exercise, try taking a daily walk.
- Eat a variety of nourishing foods and ensure that you drink plenty of liquid. If your appetite is poor, meal replacement drinks and milky drinks can provide a nutritious alternative. For information on eating well, see our free advice leaflet 'Healthy Eating'.

If your symptoms persist and you don't start feeling better soon, see your doctor.

Remember prevention is better than cure. If you are aged 65 or over, or think you may be in one of the other 'high risk' groups, talk to your doctor or practice nurse about vaccination.

Help the Aged produces a range of free advice leaflets for older people

Financial leaflets

- Can You Claim It?
- Check Your Tax
- Claiming Disability Benefits
- Managing Your Savings
- Questions on Pensions
- Thinking About Money

Housing and home safety leaflets

- Care Homes
- Fire
- Help in Your Home
- Housing Matters
- Keep Out the Cold
- Your Safety
- Your Security

Health leaflets

- Bereavement
- Better Hearing
- Better Sight
- Bladder and Bowel Weakness
- Fight the Flu
- Fitter Feet
- Healthy Bones
- Healthy Eating
- Keeping Mobile
- Managing Your Medicines
- Shingles
- Staying Steady

Leaflets are free of charge and available in single copies for individuals or in large quantities for organisations. You can get leaflets in the following ways:

- by writing to the Information Resources Team
- by email on adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk
- by faxing on 020 7239 1839

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