

What is the flu?

Learn about flu prevention, get a flu shot, wash your hands often, and follow travel and public health advisories.

The flu, or influenza, is a respiratory illness caused by airborne viruses that spread from person-to-person by droplets from coughing or sneezing. The period between becoming infected with the virus and becoming ill is usually 1 to 4 days. The contagious period is 3 to 5 days from the onset of symptoms. Symptoms of the flu, or influenza, are:

- Fever (up to 104 degrees) and sweating/chills
- Shortness of breath
- Vomiting and nausea (in children)

A cold and flu are alike in many ways. A stuffy nose, sore throat and sneezing are usually signs of a cold. "Stomach flu" is not really the flu, as there are no respiratory symptoms. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea without the fever, cough, aching and respiratory symptoms is actually gastroenteritis, but some people call it "stomach flu." This form is caused by other microorganisms and has no relationship to true influenza.

How flu spreads

Flu viruses spread in respiratory droplets caused by coughing and sneezing. They usually spread from close person-to-person contact, though sometimes people become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth, eyes or nose. The virus can live for as long as two hours on surfaces like doorknobs, desks and tables.

Healthy adults, infected with the virus, may be able to infect others beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five days after becoming sick. That means that you can pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

Avoiding Seasonal Flu

There are several things you can do to keep from getting seasonal flu:

Get a flu shot

When you get vaccinated, it greatly reduces your chances of getting seasonal flu. Since the flu season can last through May, even January is not too late to get a flu shot; however, it takes two weeks after the shot to develop adequate immunity.

Students may get a flu shot through the Health Center, usually just after the Bates October break.

Faculty and staff will be given an opportunity to receive a free flu shot on campus. Look for an announcement from the Office of Human Relations on scheduling.

Wash your hands

Hand washing is effective in preventing the flu, cold and other infectious diseases. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), rubbing your hands together with soap and water is one of the most important ways to prevent infection. Disease-causing germs can enter your body when your unwashed hands touch your nose, eyes, mouth, and open wounds. Make hand washing a habit and encourage others in your workplace to do the same.

When soap and water are not available, use an antibacterial hand cleaner. Choose alcohol hand rubs with 60 - 95 percent alcohol (usually listed as isopropyl, ethanol or propanol). Glycerol or other skin conditioning agents are helpful additives. Read the directions and use the hand rub appropriately. Never wipe the hand rub off; allow your hands to air dry. When used properly, these sanitizers reduce the transmission of disease-causing germs.

Other ways to prevent the flu

- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- When you come back from public places such as a mall, wash your hands.
- Cover your mouth with tissue when sneezing.
- Stay away from others if you are sick; don't go to class or work.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

Get help if you are sick

If you develop symptoms of the flu, contact your health care provider. There may be medications to relieve your symptoms. Get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids and avoid using alcohol and tobacco.

The flu can be debilitating, causing the person who is ill to be bedridden for extended periods. Be alert to the well being of your friends, relatives and co-workers. Those with the flu may need assistance in getting medical attention and care.

If you are at special risk from complications of flu, you should consult your health care provider immediately upon recognizing flu symptoms. Those at risk include people 65 years or older, people with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women or children.