

# Flu

**What is flu?** "Flu" is an illness caused by a virus. In a bad year a lot of people may be infected at the same time - this is called an epidemic. Flu epidemics are difficult to predict, and usually last a few weeks. Flu is spread by the coughs and sneezes of people who are infected. It can spread very rapidly.

**What are the symptoms?** Many people confuse flu with a heavy cold, but it tends to start more suddenly, and flu has symptoms you don't get with a cold:

- high fever
- feeling 'shivery'
- headache
- aching limbs
- no energy

You may feel really ill and have a temperature for around a week. You could feel weak and in low spirits for several weeks longer.

**How serious is it?** For most people, flu is just a nasty experience, and is no more serious than that. For some people it can lead to more serious illnesses, usually if they have other longstanding illnesses. These people should have a flu vaccination:

- anyone over 65
- heart problems (angina, valve problems)
- chest problems (asthma, bronchitis)
- kidney disease
- diabetes
- lowered immunity because of medicines such as steroids or cancer treatment
- any other serious longstanding medical condition

**What should I do?** Medicines aren't much use when you've got flu - flu is a virus, so antibiotics won't help unless the flu has led to another illness. Painkillers such as Paracetamol or Aspirin help relieve the headache and muscle aches, as well as reducing your temperature. But don't give Aspirin to children under 12.

The best way to treat flu is to:

- stay at home, keep warm and rest
- drink plenty of liquids (not alcohol)
- eat what you can

If you live on your own, tell a friend or neighbour that you are ill, so they can check on you, bring in some food or do any essential shopping.

**Should I contact the doctor?** There is no need to contact the doctor, unless:

- you have one of the conditions listed above
- you are frail or elderly
- your temperature doesn't settle after 4 or 5 days
- your symptoms get worse
- you think you are seriously ill
- you develop chest pain or become short of breath

If you are just worried, it's simplest to discuss your symptoms on the phone, rather than making an appointment.

**Can I avoid getting flu?** It's difficult to avoid catching flu when it's about. Keeping away from crowded places can help. you could also encourage people with flu to stay at home, to avoid infecting others.

### **Further Links**

- [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)