

## **INFLUENZA DISEASE AND COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Influenza (flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. People who have the flu often experience some or all of these symptoms: fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, and fatigue. Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults. While flu outbreaks can happen as early as October, influenza activity in Ohio usually peaks in January, February or March.

### **How is influenza infection spread?**

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. (This is called "droplet spread".) These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touch their own mouth, eyes or possibly their nose before washing their hands.

People exposed to the flu may be able to infect others beginning the day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and those with weakened immune systems, may be able to infect others for an even longer time.

### **Who is at high risk for developing flu-related complications?**

Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people), but certain people are at greater risk for serious complications if they get the flu:

- Children younger than 5, but especially younger than 2 years of age
- Adults 65 years of age and older
- Pregnant women
- American Indians and Alaskan Natives seem to be at higher risk of flu complications
- People who have medical conditions, including
  - Asthma (even if it's controlled or mild)
  - Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions
  - Chronic lung disease (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD] and cystic fibrosis)
  - Heart disease (such as congenital heart disease, congestive heart failure and coronary artery disease)
  - Blood disorders (such as sickle cell disease)
  - Endocrine disorders (such as diabetes mellitus)
  - Kidney disorders
  - Liver disorders
  - Metabolic disorders (such as inherited metabolic disorders and mitochondrial disorders)
  - Weakened immune system due to disease or medication (such as people with HIV or AIDS, or cancer, or those on chronic steroids)

- People younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy
- People who are morbidly obese (Body Mass Index [BMI] of 40 or greater).

### **What can be done to decrease risk?**

The first and most important step in preventing flu is to get an annual seasonal flu vaccine. When more people get vaccinated against the flu, less flu can spread through that community. Proper hygiene, including frequent hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying away from sick individuals, can also help individuals protect themselves.

### **What about the vaccine?**

The influenza vaccine is now recommended yearly for anyone over 6 months old. Infants are not be vaccinated until they are 6 months old. The vaccine will change year-to-year depending on the most common type of influenza that circulated in the previous flu season.

With any medication, including vaccines, there is a chance of side effects. These are usually mild and go away on their own, but serious reactions are also possible. People should not get a flu vaccine dose if they have ever had a serious allergic reaction to eggs or a previous dose of the vaccine. If you have a moderate to severe acute illness, you should wait until you feel better. If you have ever had Guillain-Barré Syndrome, you will need to discuss vaccination with your doctor. Common reactions are warmth, redness, swelling and tenderness at the injection site. If any unusual condition occurs following vaccination, seek medical attention right away.

College students who decide to be vaccinated (or their parents if they are less than 18 years of age) should contact their health care provider or the student health center. Flu vaccines are also readily available at pharmacies and local health departments.

For more information about the influenza vaccine, you may access the "Vaccine Information Statement" (VIS) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/flu.pdf>

Adapted from material on the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/index.htm>