

What to do about Flu?

Dr. Dave Fairbanks

What is **flu**? Is it an infection? Is it a bacteria or a virus? Does it cause pneumonia or is it a stomach and diarrheal illness? It can be all of these things, that's why it's confusing. Here's why:

Hemophilus Influenza B – nicknamed **h.flu**, is a bacteria responsible for many childhood illnesses like ear infections, respiratory infections and meningitis, which can be fatal. Because of these fatal illnesses we now immunize all children against h.flu with the HIB vaccination.

Gastroenteritis – nicknamed stomach **flu**, is an intestinal virus which causes low grade fever, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea for 12 to 96 hours.

Influenza – nicknamed **flu**, is a respiratory virus responsible for causing a high fever, cough, muscle aches, headache and fatigue. Influenza has historically been responsible for epidemic illness and fatalities each year.

Is it a cold or the flu?

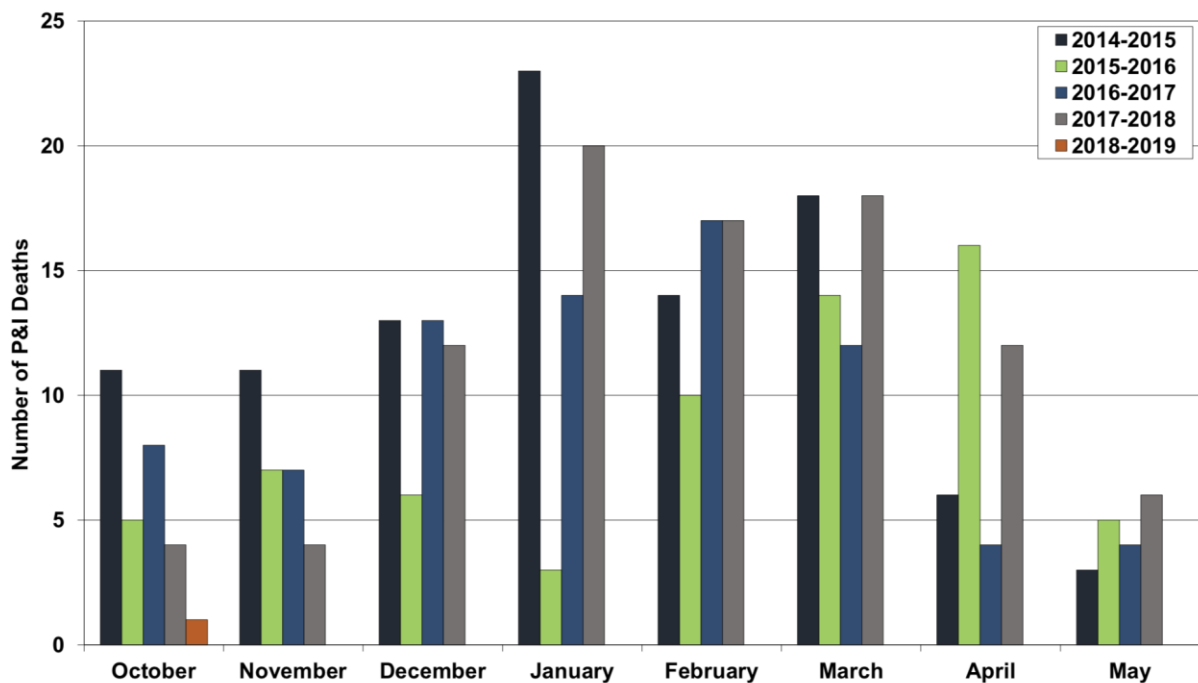
Signs and Symptoms	Influenza	Cold
Symptom onset	Abrupt	Gradual
Fever	Usual	Rare
Aches	Usual	Slight
Chills	Fairly common	Uncommon
Fatigue, weakness	Usual	Sometimes
Sneezing	Sometimes	Common
Stuffy nose	Sometimes	Common
Sore throat	Sometimes	Common
Chest discomfort, cough	Common	Mild to moderate
Headache	Common	Rare

Flu rarely causes upset stomach and vomiting—the illness that people call "stomach flu" is not influenza⁵

I'm healthy, why should I worry?

Influenza and its most common complication, pneumonia, rank in the top 6 causes of death in the United States. Influenza causes 20,000 to 40,000 deaths and 4 times as many hospitalizations each year. If you are over 65 your risk of serious illness resulting from the flu increases to over 60%. Over 50 million workdays are missed each year because of pneumonia and influenza at a cost of over \$1 billion dollars.

Monthly P&I Mortality Reports



Last year in Wyoming nearly 100 people died from influenza and one has already died in October. In 1919 influenza caused a death in almost every family in the US and literally wiped out whole towns. Once exposed to the virus your body should develop a resistance to the illness. However, over time mutations (or genetic variations) in the virus can disguise the virus from the body's immune system and the new virus can then attack those previously infected. Large changes, called antigenic shift, account for major epidemics Asian Flu in 1957, Hong Kong Flu in 1968, Russian Flu in 1977.

How Is Influenza Treated?

Vaccination is the best way of preventing illness, complications and death due to influenza -- but it is not 100%. Flu shots work best when the vaccine and the current

strain are closely matched. But it can be hard to predict what the next flu will look like. Fortunately, Australia and Brazil have their flu season in our summer and we can see if the new strain is significantly different from the current vaccine. That is why new flu vaccines come out every year. Australia's World Health Organization's Director states this year's vaccine has been very effective.

Why should I my flu shot now? Since the immunization requires 4-6 weeks to stimulate your immune system to peak resistance, it is best to get it now, before the peak of the flu season in January.

Who should get the Flu Shot?

Anyone can get the flu shot. But, if you are in any of the following groups or live in a household with someone who is, CDC recommends that you get the flu vaccine.

- ❑ You are 50 years of age or older
- ❑ You have chronic diseases of your heart, lungs, or kidneys
- ❑ You have diabetes
- ❑ Your immune system does not function properly
- ❑ You have a severe form of anemia
- ❑ You will be more than 3 months pregnant during the flu season
- ❑ You live in a nursing home or other chronic-care housing facility
- ❑ You are in close contact with children 0 to 23 months of age

Why won't my doctor treat me with antibiotics?

Since a virus causes the flu, antibiotics, which are used to fight bacteria, don't work. An anti-viral such as Tamiflu, can help reduce symptoms, but it has to be treated early.

What can I do?

In addition to medical treatments for the flu, there are some measures you can take to stop the spread and recover more quickly:

- Stay home – don't infect your co-workers
- Stay in bed – rest helps the body to regenerate more quickly
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Ibuprofen to control fevers and muscle aches

Preventing the Flu

Even though you feel the flu over your entire body, the virus that causes the flu lives primarily in the lungs. Influenza spreads easily from person to person. When an infected person sneezes and coughs, someone else may breathe in the airborne droplets of fluids containing the flu virus. Flu viruses also can enter the body through the membranes of the eyes, nose, and mouth.

Here are some tips for reducing your chance of getting the Flu:

- * Wash your hands frequently
- * Carefully clean dishes, utensils, and glasses immediately after use
- * Avoid contact with individuals who have flu-like symptoms

Because the flu can lead to complications, it is very important that you talk to your healthcare professional if you believe you have symptoms of the flu.

Additional tips may be found on the web at

CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm>

NIH <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/search/niidsite/flu>



David W. Fairbanks, M.D. is the County Health Officer for Big Horn County. He is a physician at the Sheridan VA Medical Center. He is Board Certified in Family Medicine, and a fellow of the American Academy of Family Physicians. He serves as the Governor's appointee – Medical Commissioner to the State Emergency Response Commission, Wyoming Department of Homeland Security.