

## Influenza Fact Sheet

### What is it?

Influenza, or “the flu,” is a potentially serious, contagious disease that is caused by a virus. When the flu attacks the lungs, the tissues temporarily become swollen and inflamed.

For healthy children and adults, the flu is typically a moderately severe illness that usually runs its course in two or more weeks. But for unhealthy or elderly people, the flu can be very dangerous. And it can be complicated by pneumonia, especially in those 65 and older. The flu and pneumonia combined are the seventh-leading cause of death among Americans age 65 and older. And they resulted in a combined 52,847 deaths in 2007.

Some of the common symptoms of the flu are: fever, body aches and pains, chills, sore throat, coughing, and fatigue. In severe cases, difficulty breathing may occur.

### What causes it?

The flu is caused by a virus that may belong to different strains of three different flu virus types: A, B, or C. Type A viruses are the most common in adults. Some strains may be more serious than others. For example, avian or “bird flu” is a subtype of type A that has occurred since 1997. While the death rate has been over 50% in the parts of the Far East, Africa, and Europe where it appeared, it is mainly transmitted to humans by contact with diseased poultry. 2009 H1N1 is a novel strain of swine flu that reappeared in 2009 and will likely be a factor in the 2009-2010 flu season.

### Who is at risk?

The flu is a very serious illness for anyone at high risk, such as those age 65 and older and those with certain health conditions. These conditions may include:

- Chronic lung diseases (asthma, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, COPD)
- Tuberculosis
- Cystic fibrosis
- Heart disease
- Chronic kidney disease
- Diabetes, or other chronic metabolic disorder
- Severe anemia
- Diseases or treatments that depress immunity

### How is it treated?

In most cases, doctors advise letting the virus run its course and managing symptoms such as fever,

aches, and coughing with over-the-counter remedies. They also advise drinking plenty of fluids and getting rest. There are, however, antiviral drugs that may help if given very soon after exposure to, or onset of, the flu. These drugs may reduce duration of the illness and the severity of symptoms.

### **Can it be prevented?**

Annual flu shots protect against common flu strains. They are recommended for all persons 50 years of age and older, as well as:

- People with chronic health conditions, especially chronic lung diseases (asthma, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, COPD)
- Residents of long-term care facilities
- Healthcare workers and caregivers of high-risk people
- School-aged children, to reduce the risk of becoming ill with the flu or transmitting it to others
- Women who are or expect to be pregnant during the flu season
- Children aged 6 months to 5 years and adults who are in close contact with them

The best time to have your flu shot is as soon as possible after the vaccine becomes available in the fall of each year. In 2008, 66.3% of U.S. adults age 65 and older received the flu shot during the preceding year. Flu shots are covered by Medicare and other health insurance programs. Ask your doctor if you should be vaccinated for the new H1N1 virus.

Most people have little or no reaction to the flu shot. The most common side effect is a swollen, red, tender area where the shot is given, which affects 10 to 64 percent of patients. A new option for flu vaccination is a nasal spray vaccine that has been approved by the FDA for healthy people 5-49 years of age. Ask your doctor if this new option is right for you.