

# Flu & Pneumonia

## Colorado Gerontological Society

Influenza is the major cause of death due to infectious disease in the U.S. causing as many as 56,000 deaths per year. Severe pneumococcal bacterial infections result in death in 30 to 40 percent of elderly patients.

The development of vaccines and antibiotics, improved hygiene, regulations for food handling, and treated water supplies have led to major inroads in preventing and treating diseases that used to affect millions. However, new and often difficult to treat infectious agents have proven to be major threats to public health.

There are different kinds of flu — avian, SARS, “seasonal”, H1N1 (swine). These are viruses, and getting vaccinated against them is the key measure to prevent illness from flu. Influenza can cause significant sickness



### Risk Factors

- Over age 65.
- Occupation (those working in health care or child care settings have a greater likelihood of contracting flu).
- Living in very close situations such as assisted living, retirement communities and nursing homes.
- Weakened immune systems with such conditions as cancer treatments, anti-rejection drugs or HIV/AIDS drugs.
- Chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes, and asthma.
- Smoking.
- Having a change in mental status that increases the risk of aspiration.
- Taking a proton pump inhibitor that reduces stomach acid.
- Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol.
- Malnourishment.

and death during epidemics.

Hand washing is one of the most effective and most overlooked ways to prevent the spread of disease.

The major lethal complication of influenza for the elderly is pneumonia, because the elderly are less able to withstand infections. Pneumonia may be difficult to diagnose in the elderly and some cases will be unresponsive or difficult to treat.

Pneumococcal vaccines are recommended for individuals a) over 65; b) 50 and over who are in institutions; and c) having problems such as diabetes, chronic heart or lung disease (emphysema), or chronic kidney problems.

## Preventative Measures

- Reduce stress.
- Eat a healthy diet to improve your immune system with Vitamins A, C and E plus minerals zinc and selenium. Some foods that have these are spinach, sunflower seeds, lamb, red bell peppers, and portabella mushrooms.
- Take Vitamin C supplements (The recommended dosage for men is 90 mg per day and 75 mg per day for women).
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water throughout the day, especially when you are in public places. If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based sanitizers.
- Get a flu shot annually and a pneumonia shot per your health care provider's recommendation. Medicare Part B will pay for your flu shot. (Individuals who have a Medicare Advantage Health Plan must receive the shot from a network provider to avoid a co-payment and other charges.)

## Diagnosis

- High fevers, maybe as high as 103°F to 104°F
- Burning eyes
- Runny nose
- Weakness
- Sore throat
- Extreme fatigue
- Hacking, dry cough
- Muscle and joint aches (may be severe)
- Headache

These symptoms usually last 2-5 days, but the cough may linger for a week or two and the fatigue longer.

## Treatment & Management

Individuals who are over age 65 may have to be hospitalized if they have heart failure, asthma, lung disease, diabetes, kidney failure, or liver disease. Individuals who are not able to keep food down or who are unable to cough up mucus and clear the lungs may also have to be hospitalized.

### Wash Your Hands: The Right Way

When washing hands with soap and water:

- Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue rubbing hands for 15-20 seconds. Need a timer? Imagine singing "Happy Birthday" twice through to a friend.
- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use your paper towel to turn off the faucet.
- Always use soap and water if your hands are visibly dirty. If soap and clean water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub to clean your hands. Alcohol-based hand rubs significantly reduce the number of germs on skin and are fast-acting.



In general a flu can be treated through the following:

- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol or other brands) to ease the fever and aches; aspirin may also be effective.
- Cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing. Sneeze "into your elbow."
- Avoid touching your eyes.
- If you have a severe case of the flu, contact your health care provider about getting an antiviral medication which can shorten your illness by 1-2 days. Or you can take over-the-counter drugs such as Tamiflu® or Relenza® for five days.
- Stay away from sick friends.
- Stay home if you are sick. Individuals, who have the pneumonia, usually require a broad spectrum antibiotic.



## TIPS

- ⇒ Sprinkle a little red pepper in your hot chicken noodle soup to help clear nasal passages.
- ⇒ Ensure proper oral hygiene for patients in nursing homes or on

## Questions For Your Doctor

- How high might my fever be? How long will it last? When will the high fever be dangerous?
- How will the medicines that I am currently taking interact with the flu medications?
- Will a flu shot keep me from getting colds all year long?



### HELPFUL RESOURCE

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention --  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO