

# Influenza Information

*From the Boston Public Health Commission Fact Sheet & BCIL  
For more information: [www.bphc.org/swineflu](http://www.bphc.org/swineflu).*

## ***What is influenza?***

Influenza (often called “flu”) is a contagious disease caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms include sudden fever, cough, muscle aches, headache and general weakness, and there have been reports of diarrhea and vomiting with Swine Flu. Flu may also cause a runny nose and sore throat. The symptoms can range from mild to severe.

## ***Is flu dangerous?***

It can be, particularly for the very young, the very old and for those with underlying medical problems. Most people have mild illness lasting a few days; however some may develop pneumonia or other serious complications. Every year, flu causes thousands of hospital admissions in the United States.

## ***How is flu spread?***

The viruses that cause flu live in the nose and throat and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. People nearby can then breathe in the virus. Flu symptoms usually start 1 to 3 days after a person breathes in the virus. People can spread the flu virus 1 day before their symptoms begin until 1 week afterward.

## ***People at high risk for complications from the flu:***

- < Children aged 6 months until their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday
- < Pregnant women
- < People 50 years of age and older
- < People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions
- < People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities

## ***People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu include:***

- < Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu (see above)
- < Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than 6 months of age
- < Healthcare workers

## ***What can I do to prevent becoming sick with influenza?***

There are a number of things that you can do to lessen your chance of developing influenza or any respiratory illness.

- Clean your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, if possible

### ***How can I stop the spread of germs if I have an influenza-like illness?***

There are many ways you can help prevent the spread of germs.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue every time you cough or sneeze. Then throw the used tissue in a waste basket. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your upper sleeve.
- After coughing or sneezing, always clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Stay home when you are sick. It is recommended that you stay at home (5 days for an adult and 7 days for children) after onset of symptoms or until symptoms have resolved, whichever is shorter.
- Do not share eating utensils, drinking glasses, towels or other personal items, especially with people who are ill.

### ***What should I do if I get the Flu?***

Contact your physician immediately if you begin to experience flu symptoms.

### ***Are there any medications that I can take?***

Antiviral medicines can be used to treat influenza, but are most often recommended for persons at high risk of developing complications from the flu. To be effective, these medicines must be started within 24-48 hours of symptom onset. These drugs can reduce the symptoms of the flu and shorten the time you are sick by 1-2 days. At the present time there is not a vaccine for Swine Flu.

### ***Other concerns for people with disabilities and elders:***

If you depend on medications, be sure you have a back-up supply in the event restrictions are placed on travel. Have back-up supplies of food and water. And be sure that you have back-up plans if you are dependent on personal care attendants, home health aides, or other community-based services that could be restricted in a flu pandemic.