Influenza (The “Flu”)

Influenza (in flŭ EN za), also known as “the flu,” is an illness caused by a virus(es). Different types (strains) of flu virus cause illness each year. These germs are contagious and easily spread from person to person.

How the flu spreads

The flu virus spreads when a person breathes in air droplets from the infected person who coughs, sneezes or even laughs less than 3 feet from another person (Picture 1). The virus can also get into your body when you touch something that the infected person has sneezed, coughed or drooled on and then you touch your mouth, nose or eyes.

Flu germs can live for up to 2 days on hard surfaces like toys, tables, computer keyboards, phones and doorknobs.

An infected person can infect others before he or she knows she has the flu and for at least 7 days after getting sick.

Symptoms of the flu

Symptoms of the flu and a common cold look alike. However, flu symptoms come on faster and are worse. A child who has the flu may have some or all of these:

- fever
- headache
- cough
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- chills
- muscle and body aches
- weakness
- tiredness
- stomach pain
- vomiting
- diarrhea

In some people, the flu may lead to sinus or ear infections, pneumonia or dehydration (being “dried out”). People who have diabetes, heart, lung or kidney problems or a
weakened immune system may have a harder time fighting the flu. These people should contact their doctors if they get sick.

**Prevent the flu with the flu vaccine**

- The best way to help prevent the flu or keep your child or yourself from catching a bad case of it, is to **get a flu vaccine every year**.
  - Anyone who is 6 months or older should have a flu vaccine each year.
  - If your child is younger than 8 years old and getting the vaccine for the first time, he or she should get 2 doses in early fall, as soon as the vaccine is available.

Scientists make a new vaccine formula each year based on which strains they predict will appear. That is why the vaccine works better some years than others.

- There are two types of flu vaccines:
  - Injection (shot). This is the best choice if your child is older than 6 months. It uses dead virus.
  - Intranasal (taken in through the nose) uses a weakened form of live virus. The intranasal form of the vaccine:
    - should only be given to people who cannot take the shot.
    - is for healthy people ages 2 to 49 years who are not pregnant.
    - should not be given to anyone caring for a person with a weak immune system.

- Tell your doctor if you or your child have any medical problems or allergies before getting vaccinated. It is safe for anyone with an egg allergy or an allergy to thimerosal to get the vaccine. (Thimerosal is a preservative used in some vaccines. No pre-packaged, single dose flu vaccine contains Thimerosal. Also, thimerosal is not in any vaccine given to children.)

- Tell your doctor if you are pregnant. It is safe and recommended that pregnant women get the flu vaccine.

**Other ways to prevent the flu**

There are other things you can do and teach your child to do to keep from getting the flu.

- Frequent and good hand washing is VERY important! Wash hands with soap and water for 15 to 20 seconds or the same amount of time it takes to sing the Happy Birthday song two times (Picture 2).

- If you do not have access to soap and water, wash hands with alcohol-based hand wipes or gel hand cleaner that is...
at least 60% alcohol. When using gel, rub hands until dry.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Throw tissues away where no one else can touch them. Wash hands afterward.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth whenever possible.
- Wash things used for drinking and eating in hot soapy water. Do not share them with others.
- Wipe down hard surfaces that may have virus germs on them. Use a disinfectant wipe or soap and water.
- Stay away from people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Practice good health habits. Eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of water and get enough rest to keep your immune system strong.

Treatment

- The doctor may prescribe an antiviral medicine to help your child to get well sooner. The medicine works best if started within 24 hours after symptoms begin.
- Since a virus causes the flu, antibiotics will not help. However, antibiotics may be prescribed to treat a bacterial complication.
- Check your child’s temperature using a digital thermometer. Never use a mercury thermometer. Wash the thermometer thoroughly after each use.
  - Use only a rectal (in baby’s bottom) thermometer in infants **under 3 months** of age.
  - For infants **4 months of age or older**, take rectal, ear or axillary (armpit) temperatures.
  - When your child reaches **4 years of age**, oral (mouth) temperatures are OK.
- If your child has pain or fever, you may give acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®) as directed. Read the label to know the right dose for your child.
- **Do not give your child aspirin or products that contain aspirin! Do not give ibuprofen to children younger than 6 months** (Picture 3.)
- Give your child lots of liquids to drink, like water, Pedialyte®, apple juice and popsicles.
When to call the doctor

Call your child’s doctor if your child has:

- a high fever
  - for any age, a temperature over 102°F (38.9°C) that lasts more than 2 days.
  - for age 3 months or younger, a temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher.
- signs of dehydration (being “dried out”). These signs include no tears when crying, dry lips, dry and sticky mouth, fewer wet diapers or no urine for 6 or more hours.
- trouble breathing
- little or no appetite and will not eat or drink
- any other symptoms that do not go away or get worse.

When you and your child are at the doctor’s office, clinic or hospital

- You may be asked to wear a mask to protect others if you have flu symptoms.
- Do not worry if you see staff and others wearing masks. They are preventing the spread of germs.