



K A N S A S

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Seasonal Influenza – What It Is and How Kansans Can Protect Themselves

What is influenza?

Influenza (flu) is a viral infection of the nose, throat, bronchial tubes and lungs. There are two main types of virus - A and B. Each type includes many different strains, which tend to change each year.

When does influenza occur?

Influenza occurs most often in the winter months. Illnesses resembling influenza may occur in the summer months but they are usually due to other viruses.

Who gets influenza?

Anyone can get influenza, but it is most serious in the elderly, people with chronic illnesses such as cancer, emphysema or diabetes, or with weak immune systems.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza is highly contagious and is easily transmitted through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person during coughing and sneezing.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Typical flu symptoms include headache, fever, chills, cough, and body aches. Intestinal symptoms are uncommon. Although most people are ill for only a few days, some people have a more serious illness, such as pneumonia, and may need to be hospitalized. Thousands of people die each year in the United States from the flu or related complications.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

The symptoms usually appear one to three days after infection.

How is influenza diagnosed?

Usually a doctor will diagnose a case of the flu based on typical symptoms of fever, chills, headache, cough and body aches. Specific lab tests to confirm the flu are costly and time-consuming and are usually limited to outbreak or disease surveillance efforts.

How long can a person spread influenza?

The contagious period varies, but probably begins the day before symptoms appear and may last a week.

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Does past infection make one immune?

Generally, no. The viruses that cause flu frequently change, so people who have been infected or given a flu shot in previous years may become infected with a new strain. Because of this, and because any immunity produced by the flu shot possibly will decrease in the year after vaccination, people in high-risk groups should be vaccinated every year. People should be vaccinated before the expected influenza is seen in the community. In the United States, this period is from November through March.

What are high-risk groups?

- The following groups are at increased risk for serious illness and complications with the flu and should receive vaccine:
- People 65 years of age and older;
- Those with long-term heart or lung problems;
- Residents of nursing homes, and other institutions housing patients who have serious long-term health problems;
- People who have kidney disease, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, anemia, severe asthma, cancer or immunologic disorders, and other medical conditions for which they are under the close supervision of a doctor;
- Household contacts of high-risk people and health workers who provide care to high-risk patients.

What is the treatment for influenza?

Rest and liquids are usually adequate. Prescription anti-viral drugs, including zanamivir, oseltamivir, rimantadine, and amantadine, are available and can reduce duration of symptoms by a day. They do not decrease the serious complications of influenza. These medications must be administered within 48 hours of illness onset.

What can control or prevent influenza?

Routine immunization against influenza is the most important control measure. All high-risk individuals should be vaccinated every year. Influenza vaccines (flu shot) may be available through your physician or local health department. When influenza type A occurs in an area, amantadine or rimantadine may be prescribed for certain individuals. The drugs may be most useful for preventing disease in people who cannot take the vaccine, but they are not expected to replace the vaccine. Because new influenza viruses often appear, the effectiveness of the vaccine sometimes varies from one year to the next. Nevertheless, studies have shown that even in years when new strains emerge, people in high-risk groups who obtain annual flu shots tend to have milder illness and are less likely to be hospitalized with complications due to influenza.

What can I do to protect myself from getting influenza?

- Get a flu shot;
- Wash your hands often to keep from picking up germs;
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick;
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing;
- Stay home when you are sick and keep children home from school if they have flu-like symptoms.