

# Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

## The Flu Is Not Just a Cold

The terms “a cold” and “the flu” are not the same thing. The common cold, caused by any one of 250 viruses, lasts for a few days and causes cough and a stuffy or runny nose, which may be accompanied by a fever. The “flu”, caused by the influenza virus, is a potentially more serious infection. The flu often begins like a cold, but is usually associated with:

- high fever
- severe muscle/body aches
- chills
- headache
- loss of appetite
- extreme fatigue and weakness

While a cold usually lasts for a few days and goes away on its own without any complication or problem, the flu can last up to 7-10 days or even longer. Also, the cough and fatigue from an influenza infection can persist for weeks. The bottom line is that the flu is not the same as a cold; it is potentially a much more dangerous infection than the common cold.

### How is the flu spread?

The influenza virus is spread from one person to another by airborne droplets in a cough or a sneeze. It is important to realize that the influenza virus can also be spread indirectly; because it can live for up to 48 hours outside of the body, this virus can be contracted from surfaces such as telephones, computer keyboards, door-knobs and toys. Don't forget that unwashed hands and kitchen utensils can also transmit the virus.

### Who is at risk?

The elderly, people with chronic medical problems and children less than 24 months of age are at high risk. In other words, they may develop severe flu infection requiring hospitalization and even resulting in death.

### Treating the flu

Unfortunately, there is no specific cure or medicine for the flu. There are some new anti-influenza virus medications on the market, but they only work when taken very early on. If one develops the flu, the treatment includes:

- rest
- drinking plenty of fluids
- acetaminophen (Tempra or Tylenol) for fever and pain

### Some important points to remember:

- Antibiotics are not effective against the influenza virus.
- Aspirin (ASA) should never be given to children with the flu.
- People with the flu should avoid contact with seniors, young children and people with chronic underlying medical conditions.

Getting the flu vaccine or “flu shot” is the best way to prevent the flu. Aside from the flu vaccine, here are some other steps you can take to help prevent the spread of the flu virus:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Keep your child home if he or she is sick.
- Stay at home if you have the flu.
- Teach your children to cough or sneeze into their sleeves.
- Teach your children and yourself to wash your hands frequently, especially before and after meals.

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