

Is it the Flu?

Influenza or the “flu” is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Because many of the symptoms common to influenza can also be associated with other illnesses it can sometimes be difficult to tell the difference.

Rapid diagnostic tests are available to detect influenza and consulting your physician or healthcare provider is the best way to ensure the most accurate diagnosis.

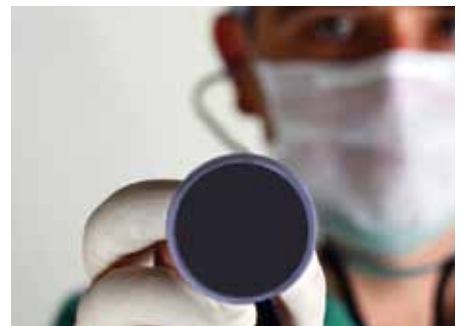
According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), common indicators of influenza may include the following symptoms:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Tiredness (can be extreme)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body aches
- Diarrhea and vomiting
(more common among children than adults)

Having these symptoms does not always mean that you have the flu. Many different illnesses, including the common cold, can have similar symptoms. However, if you develop flu-like indicators and are concerned about your illness, especially if you are at high risk for complications of the flu, consult your healthcare provider for more information or for an examination.

Note: Healthy adults may be able to infect others *one day before* getting symptoms and up to *five days after* getting sick. Therefore, it is possible to give someone the flu before you know you are sick as well as while you are sick.

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Getting Tested

Certain tests can determine if you have the flu if you are tested within the first two or three days of illness, according to the CDC. Among these assays are rapid diagnostic tests that screen for influenza virus infection.

- To date, the fastest tests can be run in about 10 minutes
- More than 10 rapid influenza tests are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

Why test? Testing during an outbreak of acute respiratory disease can determine if influenza is the cause. Identifying the presence of influenza can help speed appropriate treatment and can help prevent patients from unwittingly spreading the disease to loved ones and close contacts.

Testing can help avoid misdiagnosis. A 2006 New England Journal of Medicine study found that, in the outpatient setting, 83% of laboratory-confirmed cases of influenza were misdiagnosed in patients younger than age 5. Diagnostic testing can provide additional indicators of influenza's presence.

During flu season, testing of selected patients who present with respiratory illnesses compatible with influenza can also help establish whether influenza is present in a specific population of patients and can help healthcare providers determine how to use their clinical judgment for diagnosing and treating respiratory illness.

Note: Specimens collected for use with rapid tests should be acquired as close as possible to the start of flu symptoms and usually no more than four to five days later in adults. In very young children, flu viruses can be shed for longer periods; therefore, testing for a few days after this period may still be useful, advises the CDC.

Variations in rapid tests:

- Some test can identify influenza A and B viruses and distinguish between them
- Other tests can identify influenza A and B viruses but cannot distinguish between them
- Some tests are waived from requirements under the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments of 1988 (CLIA)
- Most tests can be used with a variety of specimen types, however test accuracy can vary based on the type of specimen collected (ex. throat swab versus nasal swab) and the brand of test used

For more information, visit the CDC online at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/diagnosis/rapidlab.htm>

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