

How to Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones Against Seasonal Flu, Avian Flu (Bird Flu) or Any Cough Illness

What is the flu?

Influenza, known as flu, is a very contagious disease of the respiratory (breathing) system. The flu is caused by a virus that is easily passed from one person to another by coughing and sneezing. For most people, the flu makes them feel very sick, but they generally get better in about a week. However, young children, people older than 65 years of age, pregnant women and people with chronic medical conditions can have serious complications from the flu. These complications can include pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, or asthma.

The following tips can help protect you and your loved ones during the regular flu season, as well as from the threat of bird flu and any cough illness.

Get a flu shot every year.

The flu vaccine that you get every year does not protect you against bird flu. But flu vaccine is the best way to protect yourself every flu season. Getting flu vaccine also means that you will not pass the flu to others.

Ask your health care provider if you should get pneumococcal vaccine.

You need pneumococcal vaccine (pneumonia shot) if you are 65 years or older, or if you have a medical condition like diabetes, asthma or heart disease.

Wash your hands.

Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze.

Cough or sneeze into a tissue or the inside of your elbow. Throw tissues away and wash your hands.

Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

This decreases the chance that you will get the flu virus or other germs into your body, or that you will pass the flu to others.

Clean things that are touched often.

Clean things that are touched often at home, work or school, such as door or refrigerator handles, computer key boards/mouse, phones and water faucets.

Avoid close contact with others who are sick.

Avoid unnecessary holding, hugging or kissing anyone who has a cold or the flu. People with young children, immune system problems or a chronic illness should avoid large crowds, unless necessary.

Stay home when you are sick.

If you have flu symptoms, stay home from work or school and avoid public activities for at least 5 days (7 days for children), so that you don't pass the flu to other people.

When visiting countries that have bird flu, avoid bird markets, bird farms and close contact with birds.

For more information about travel to countries that have bird flu, visit the CDC travel website at: www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health recommends that you do not keep supplies of antiviral medications, such as Tamiflu®, at home.

For more information about influenza visit, www.cdc.gov/flu or www.mass.gov/dph/flu, or call the MDPH Immunization Program at **617-983-6800** or **888-658-2850**