INFLUENZA OR “THE FLU”

WHAT IS IT?
Influenza is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by influenza viruses. Commonly known as “the flu”, influenza is more serious than the common cold because of the risk of complications, which can be deadly. Influenza is not the same as the “stomach flu”, which causes vomiting and diarrhea. Between 10-20% of people in the United States get influenza each year. The seasons for the common cold and influenza overlap, occurring primarily between November and March.

HOW IS IT TRANSMITTED?
The flu virus lives in the nose and throat. It is spread when tiny infected mucus particles are sprayed into the air through sneezing, coughing, and talking. Infected particles can also be transmitted to objects (like door knobs, sink handles, and cell phones), by sharing food and drinks, and through person-to-person contact. To reduce the spread of infection to others, cough or sneeze into a tissue (or your elbow if tissue is not available). Don’t forget to wash your hands after coughing or sneezing.

Hand-washing: Proper technique is important! Rub your hands together with soap and water for 15-30 seconds (about the time it takes to sing “Happy Birthday to You”) before rinsing thoroughly. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer is an effective alternative as long as you do not have visibly soiled hands.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?
Flu symptoms are similar to those of a cold but are usually more severe. The onset is typically sudden, and symptoms can include:

- Fever of 101°F or above, lasting 3-4 days
- Dry, hot skin
- Muscle and joint pains
- Headaches, dizziness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Fatigue and weakness (may last several weeks)
- Nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea (more common in children)

FOR HOW LONG AM I INFECTIOUS?
Influenza can be passed to others beginning one day before symptoms begin to an average of 7-10 days after symptoms develop.

IS THE FLU DANGEROUS?
Most people fully recover from the flu in 7-10 days, though it may take as long as 14 days. However, certain high-risk groups may be more likely to develop severe disease and complications, such as pneumonia, respiratory failure, and even death.

High-risk groups include pregnant women, infants and children under age 5, elderly persons, and persons with chronic medical problems (e.g., asthma, diabetes, heart disease, hepatitis, immune suppression, etc.).

HOW IS IT PREVENTED?
The influenza vaccine can reduce your chance of infection by about 70%. It is best to receive the vaccine in mid-October or early November, before the flu season starts. However, the flu vaccine can be given anytime during the flu season. After receiving the vaccine, it takes your body about 2 weeks to develop enough antibodies to protect against infection.

Contrary to popular belief, you cannot get the flu from the flu shot because it contains killed viruses. Only the nasal vaccine contains a live, but weakened, version of the flu virus, and is therefore not recommended for patients with certain medical conditions. Consult your healthcare provider for more information.

The flu vaccine is available at Student Health to all enrolled students free of charge. Those who are at higher risk of developing complications from influenza are strongly advised to get the vaccine.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?
Do medications help?
Antiviral medications started within 2 days of the onset of symptoms may lessen both the severity and duration of influenza. These medicines also make you less contagious to others. Treatment with antiviral medications is recommended for those patients at high-risk of developing complications. Most students, who are otherwise healthy, do not need antiviral medications to recover from the flu.

Antibiotics may be prescribed if a bacterial infection (such as pneumonia) occurs with an influenza infection. You may have a bacterial infection if your symptoms improve then worsen again, or if your illness is severe or prolonged. If you think you have a bacterial infection, it is important to seek treatment as soon as possible.

Should I stay home?
Students diagnosed with influenza should stay home until at least 24 hours after their fever is gone. Fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medication, like ibuprofen or acetaminophen. Students should not work, go to class, or attend clinical rotations while a fever is still present. It is important to adhere to this restriction to decrease the risk of infecting others.
What else can I do?

- **REST:** You do not have to stay in bed, but it's important to take it easy so that your body has the energy to fight off the virus. Avoid overexerting yourself physically and mentally.
- **DRINK FLUIDS:** Increased fluid intake is important to prevent dehydration from fevers. This means drinking enough so that you are urinating every 3 hours. Try pedialyte, sports drinks, juices, non-caffeinated sodas, soups, and gelatin. High-calorie fluids can replace solid foods for a few days if you do not feel like eating.
- **FEVER:** Fever can be treated with acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve). Do not take aspirin due to the risk of Reye’s syndrome. Follow the package directions, and take these medicines with food to avoid an upset stomach. See a healthcare provider if your fever is not improving with regular use of these medications.
- **MUSCLE & JOINT ACHES AND HEADACHES:** Acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen (not aspirin) can be used to reduce body aches and headaches. Severe or persistent headaches should be evaluated by a healthcare provider. Fever of 101°F or more, neck pain, rash, nausea, and any visual changes associated with the headache should be evaluated immediately.
- **Dry Irritating COUGH:** Dextromethorphan cough suppressant (Delsym, Robitussin DM, Triaminic DM) may be used to decrease symptoms. Follow the package directions for safe dosing. Cough drops can soothe irritated mucous membranes in the throat. Increasing non-caffeinated fluids can also help. Stop smoking if you smoke, and avoid secondhand smoke. Blood-tinged mucus may develop from a persistent dry cough; however, seek medical care immediately if the amount of blood increases. It is common to feel short of breath or wheeze during a coughing spell, but you should not feel short of breath or wheeze when at rest.
- **Wet Productive COUGH:** Do not suppress the cough! Guaifenesin (Mucinex or plain Robitussin) or any over-the-counter expectorant may be used to thin the mucus. Warm, humid air (such as from a humidifier or a steamy shower) can also help. Increase your non-caffeinated fluid intake. Consult your healthcare provider if you experience shortness of breath, if you have asthma, or if you are a heavy smoker.
- **SORE THROAT:** Comfort care includes eating soft foods, drinking fluids, using sore throat lozenges or sprays, and taking pain medications (such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen). If you are a smoker, stop smoking. Gargling with a salt-water solution (1/4 tsp of salt per ½ cup of warm water), or drinking warm water mixed with honey and lemon may also help.
- **HEAD CONGESTION:** A runny or stuffy nose can be relieved by increasing fluid intake and “steaming” in the shower or with a humidifier. Oral decongestants (such as phenylephrine or Sudafed PE) and nasal decongestants (Afrin) can help shrink swollen nasal passages. Avoid decongestant use if you have high blood pressure. Do not use Afrin for more than 3 days as this can lead to worsening congestion. Saline (salt) nasal sprays can thin out secretions and improve drainage. Nasal sprays should be used by tilting your head forward and spraying the agent into the nose while breathing in lightly. Taking an antihistamine (such as Zyrtec, Claritin, Allegra, or Benadryl) may also help.

**WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF FLU AT HOME?**

If you are the sick person:

- Avoid being around other household members, especially those at high risk of complications from influenza.
- Stay in a room separate from the common areas of the house (eg. a spare bedroom with its own bathroom is ideal). Keep the sickroom door closed.
- Use a separate bathroom if possible. Clean the bathroom daily with a household disinfectant.
- Wear a facemask if you must be in the same room as other household members or if you are out in public.
- Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, and remember to wash your hands afterwards.

If you are a household member:

- Avoid being around the sick person as much as possible. Especially avoid face-to-face contact.
- Choose one adult in the home to take care of the sick person. This person should not be someone at increased risk of developing complications from influenza.
- Do not share the sick person’s bathroom if possible. If a shared bathroom cannot be avoided, clean bathroom surfaces frequently with a household disinfectant and do not share towels.
- Clean your hands often, using soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. This is especially important after every contact with the sick person or the sick person’s room, bathroom, and belongings.

If you are a household member at high risk for complications from influenza:

- Avoid contact with the person who is sick with influenza. If you must be in the same room, stay at least 6 feet away from each other.
- If close contact with the sick person is unavoidable, wear a facemask or a N95 disposable respirator.
- Contact Student Health (828-9220 for the Monroe Park campus or 828-9220 for the MCV campus) or your medical provider to see if you should start taking antiviral medications to prevent infection with the influenza virus.

**CONSULT YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU:**

- Are not improving after 5 days or have worsening symptoms.
- Have difficulty breathing or chest pain.
- Are vomiting and unable to keep liquids down.  
- Have signs of dehydration, such as dizziness when standing or absence of urination.
- Have seizures or uncontrolled convulsions.
- Become confused or less responsive than normal.

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:**  www.cdc.gov, www.goaskalice.columbia.edu