

Human pathogen information sheet – vaccinations and hygiene keep you safe!

What is influenza?

The real flu, also referred to as influenza, is an acute disease of the respiratory system. It is a severe disease that can be life-threatening and is caused by the flu virus. The „common cold“ in contrast is caused by different pathogens. In Germany, there are flu waves of different distribution and severity in the winter months at the turn of the year. Influenza viruses change all the time, often forming new variants. These changes mean that you can contract and develop flu several times during your life. Therefore, the influenza vaccine is adjusted almost every year as well.

How is the influenza virus transmitted?

Person-to-person

Flu is highly contagious. When sneezing, coughing or speaking, tiny virus-containing droplets of secretion from the patient's nose or throat will get into the air and can be inhaled by others nearby. The viruses are passed on via the hands as well if they have come into contact with virus-containing secretion. When touching the mouth, nose or eyes afterwards, the flu viruses can enter the body through the mucous membranes.

Via contaminated objects

The pathogens can also adhere to door handles, holding grips, stair railings or similar objects and are passed on from there via the hands.

What symptoms do the patients show?

Around a third of all patients will typically experience a sudden feeling of being unwell, with symptoms including fever, a sore throat and dry cough, accompanied by muscle and back pain, aching limbs and headaches. For older patients in particular, symptoms may not be so pronounced and are similar to those of a common cold. In straightforward cases, symptoms will start to resolve after about 5 to 7 days. A cough may persist much longer, however.

The severity of the disease can differ widely. Flu patients may have slight symptoms or none at all. On the other hand, some cases of flu may be life-threatening or even fatal.

The most common **complication** is pneumonitis. In children, middle ear infections may develop as well. Inflammation of the brain or heart muscle may occur in rare cases.

What's the incubation period – and how long are you contagious?

After infection, the first symptoms occur relatively quickly after 1 to 2 days. Patients may already be contagious on the day before the symptoms start and until approx. 1 week after the first symptoms occur. Children or immune-compromised persons may excrete the pathogen for a longer period.

Who is most at risk?

Older persons, pregnant women and persons with a chronic underlying illness are at higher risk for severe progress of the flu.

What should I do if I fall ill?

- ▶ To avoid passing on the illness, limit contact with others, particularly with infants, toddlers and pregnant women, as well as with older persons and immune-compromised persons or persons with underlying conditions.
- ▶ Stay at home during the acute phase of the illness and stay in bed.
- ▶ Ensure regular ventilation of the sick room or the room where you are staying.
- ▶ Usually, only the symptoms of flu are treated. Contact your doctor if strong symptoms occur or if they worsen again. From case to case, a doctor may prescribe special medication against the flu. This is particularly the case in persons with a special risk to their health, where severe progress is likely. Such medication should be taken within 48 hours of commencement of the illness, if possible.
- ▶ Antibiotics have no effect on diseases that are caused by viruses. They are only ever prescribed if complications that are caused by bacteria occur.

FLU (INFLUENZA)

What should I do if I fall ill?

- ▶ Frequently wash your hands with water and soap and do not shake hands if possible.
- ▶ Do not sneeze or cough at others. Turn away and cough or sneeze into disposable handkerchiefs or your bent elbow. If you had your hand in front of your face when sneezing or coughing, wash your hands at once if possible. This also applies after using disposable handkerchiefs.
- ▶ Touch the mucous membranes of eyes, mouth and nose with your hands as rarely as possible.

How can I protect myself?

Vaccination

The best protection from flu is vaccination. It should be administered every year, ideally in the months of October and November. The vaccine composition is reviewed and adjusted every year to protect from the virus strains that are expected to circulate.

The German Permanent Vaccination Commission (STIKO) recommends a flu vaccination for persons who are in particular danger of severe progression:

- ▶ People 60 years and older
- ▶ Pregnant women from the second trimester of pregnancy onwards; in case of chronic underlying illness from the first trimester of pregnancy
- ▶ Children, teens and adults with an increased health risk due to an underlying condition, e.g. chronic disease of the respiratory organs, heart or circulatory conditions, liver or kidney diseases, diabetes or other metabolic diseases, chronic neurological diseases such as multiple sclerosis, congenital or acquired immune system deficiencies, HIV infection
- ▶ Employees and residents in seniors' residences and nursing homes
- ▶ Persons with a strongly increased risk of being infected themselves or infecting others, such as medical staff or personnel in organizations with frequent contact with the public

Hygiene

- ▶ Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water! Carefully dry your hands with a clean cloth after washing. This is especially important after contact with patients or after touching objects that patients touched beforehand.
- ▶ Touch the mucous membranes of eyes, mouth and nose with your hands as rarely as possible.
- ▶ Avoid shaking hands during flu waves and keep your distance from sneezing or coughing persons.
- ▶ Where possible, avoid close contact with patients, also at home.

Where can I find out more?

Your health authority can provide you with further advice and information. Since influenza must be reported to the health authority, they will also have the latest information and be very experienced in dealing with the disease.

More (specialist) information on the current flu situation is also available online on the pages of the Robert Koch Institute (www.rki.de/influenza).

For information on protection from infection by vaccination and hygiene, please visit the Federal Centre for Health Education websites (www.infektionsschutz.de, www.impfen-info.de).



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