



Flu facts

Information on flu symptoms, how to avoid it and what to do if you get it.

About the flu

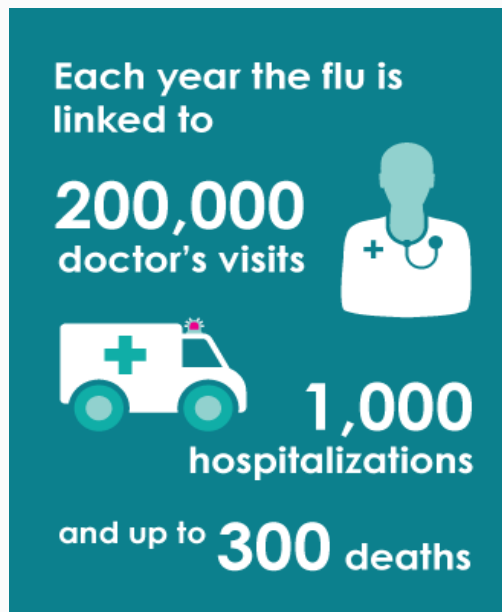
The flu is a serious illness that is caused by a virus.

People experience a number of symptoms, including:

- fever
- muscle aches
- extreme fatigue

For some people it can lead to pneumonia, which is a more serious illness. Some people can become very sick and will need hospital care.

In Canada, seasonal flu activity can begin as early as October and continue as late as May. Peak flu season is in a 10 to 16 week period that usually starts in December. Between 10% and 20% of the population will get the flu each year.



Who can get it

Anyone can get the flu. If you have it, you can infect others a day before your own symptoms even appear. You're also contagious for up to 7 days after you get sick. Children and people with weak immune systems can spread the flu virus for a longer period of time.

[Learn how the flu is affecting different parts of Ontario this year](#)

[Check Google Flu Trends for Ontario and Canada](#)

Symptoms

Symptoms usually start 1 to 4 days after exposure to the virus. In most adults, the flu lasts 2-10 days. It sometimes lasts longer for the elderly, children and people with chronic illnesses.

You may have the flu if you experience:

- fever
- chills

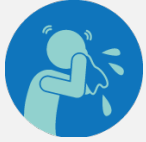
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Recommended for you

- [Find a flu shot clinic](#)
- [Flu shot safety](#)
- [Kids and the flu](#)
- [Telehealth](#)

- cough
- runny eyes
- stuffy nose
- sore throat
- headache
- muscle aches
- extreme weakness and tiredness



Symptoms vary from person to person, and some may last for several weeks. The elderly may not have a fever, while children can have symptoms like earaches or stomach problems.

High-risk groups

Some people run a higher risk of experiencing complications or hospitalization if they contract the flu. High-risk groups include children under 5, the elderly, pregnant women and people with underlying health conditions.

Flu vs. common cold

The symptoms of the flu and the common cold are very similar.

Both illnesses often come with a runny, stuffy nose and sore throat.

Unlike a case of the common cold, the flu can lead to serious health problems like pneumonia.

Use this chart to help determine if you have a cold or the flu.

| Symptom | Cold | Flu |
|---|-----------------------------|---|
| Fever | Rare | Often high (102°F – 104°F or 39°C - 40°C). Starts suddenly, lasts 3 to 4 days |
| Headache | Rare | Often, can be severe |
| Muscle aches | Sometimes, usually mild | Often, can be severe |
| Feeling tired and weak | Sometimes, usually mild | Often, can be severe, may last 2 to 3 weeks |
| Fatigue (extreme tiredness) | Unusual | Often, can be severe |
| Sneezing | Common | Sometimes |
| Chest discomfort and/or coughing | Sometimes, mild to moderate | Often, can become severe |

Avoid the flu

To avoid getting the flu:



Get the flu shot

- the most effective way to protect yourself and your family from the flu
- every year Ontario's flu shot program prevents 30,000 emergency room visits and 200,000 doctor's office visits



Wash your hands often

- wash with soap and water for at least 15 seconds
- the virus can live on your hands for up to 3 hours even if you got the flu shot, so always clean them properly to avoid making others sick



Keep an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (gel or wipes) nearby

- must be at least 60% alcohol to be effective
- wash with soap and water if your hands look dirty



Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze

- cough into your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue
- throw the tissue out right away — don't put it in your pocket or on your desk



Avoid touching your face

- the flu virus usually enters your body through the eyes, nose or mouth
- avoid holding your face in your hands or rubbing your eyes



Stay at home when you're sick

- viruses can spread easily in large crowds



Keep common surfaces and items clean and disinfected

- viruses can live on hard surfaces like countertops, door handles, computer keyboards and phones for up to 2 days

If you get the flu

If infected, be sure to:

- stay home and get plenty of rest
- drink lots of fluids
- avoid drinks with caffeine
- take basic pain or fever relievers but **do not** give acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) to children or teenagers under the age of 18
- treat muscle pain using a hot water bottle or heating pad — apply heat for short periods of time
- take a warm bath
- gargle with a glass of warm salt water or suck on hard candy or lozenges
- use spray or saline drops for a stuffy nose
- avoid alcohol and tobacco

Call your doctor or health care provider if:

- you don't start to feel better after a few days
- your symptoms get worse
- you are in a high-risk group and develop flu symptoms

You can also call [Telehealth](#) at 1-866-797-0000 to talk to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You do not need to provide your OHIP number and all information is confidential.

You may need medication or other care to help you to get better.

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