

## Got the Flu? Achooo!

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The fall weather has barely arrived when parents begin to worry about the rapidly approaching season of illness: with fall and winter come the holidays—and the flu. How bad will it be this year? What can we do to avoid it? What can we do if we get it?

Unlike the common cold, the influenza virus(es) affectionately called the “flu”, can cause serious illness even in previously healthy people. In an average flu season in the United States, the flu causes 200,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths! Adults who are elderly or affected by chronic illnesses are especially at risk; but so are the youngest of children, especially those under 5. No one is considered entirely safe or entirely immune from getting sick.

Because the infecting flu virus undergoes mutation every year, one never knows exactly how severe its impact will be from one year to the next. As the virus changes, the vaccinations against it must change, too, or else they become ineffective. In the USA we are blessed with new vaccines yearly: these are excellent and everywhere—from your doctor’s office to hospital clinics to drug store sites. Get in line!

### Achoo! What’s New?

The American Academy of Pediatrics in a brand new policy (released in August 2008) recommends that *all* children *6 months old to 18 years old* be given flu shots! This marks a significant change from the past in which children aged 6–59 months were the target population. Therefore, it may take a year or two before the new policy becomes routine and is fully implemented by pediatric practices and health plans. The best advice for now is to ask your pediatrician

whether flu shots will be available this year for your child.

The AAP also recommends that *anyone who lives or works with children younger than 5 years old* also should get a shot primarily to protect the children. Remember, even previously healthy children are at risk for severe illness if they get the flu, often landing up in the hospital with pneumonia or worse!

There are two types of vaccine available in this country to help protect against the flu: the flu *shot (TIV)* is a vaccine prepared with killed virus and approved for anyone and everyone over 6 months old; the *nasal-spray vaccine (LAIV)* is made with live attenuated (or weakened) virus and approved for use *only* in healthy people between the ages of 2 and 49. If you are pregnant, you need to get the *shot* so as not to risk exposing your baby to the live (although weakened) virus in the nasal spray vaccine.

The early fall is a perfect time to start asking your doctor and your child's pediatrician about this year's flu vaccines: what is their availability for the upcoming season and which preparation is right for you and your family? Your doctor knows the medical issues in your family and can suggest the vaccine which will be most effective and safe given your medical risks.

### **Achoo! What to do?**

You will feel lousy but not for long as the flu thankfully tends to last only a few days. Your symptoms are apt to include fever, body aches, headache, congestion or runny nose (much as if you had a cold), sore throat and, later in the illness, a cough. Although most doctors do not prescribe antiviral medications for the flu (treating with medication is *not* recommended by the CDC), it is well worth calling your doctor when you get sick. Depending on your own health issues and the severity of your symptoms, he might ask to see you.

As with treating a cold, rest, liquids and over the counter medicine like ibuprofen can help you feel better. Please note that *aspirin is to be avoided* when you have the flu!

What about work? Please stay home! This is especially true if you work with young children who are at risk for severe illness if they get the flu. You are contagious from a day before your symptoms start (not a very helpful detail) for about seven days into the illness.

**Achoo: Not from you!**

If a family member or co-worker gets the flu, how can you keep from getting sick, too?

The answer to this is like remembering to fasten your seatbelt: build in habits that are great for everyday but critical when you need them. If you teach your children to:

- wash their hands after they blow their noses,
- wash their hands before they eat,
- wash their hands and faces after they have been at school or out in the "real world"

then you will have built in a set of habits that will protect them against the "accident" of being exposed to the flu. Washing your hands frequently and consistently is the single most important action you can take to stay well during flu season. Remember: *Avoid the sickness and the strife; wash that flu right out of your life!*

*Sources:*

The Red Book (AAP 2006)

AAP Policy Statement (8/8/2008) at

[www.cisimmunize.org/ill/Flu/Influenza%20Recommendations](http://www.cisimmunize.org/ill/Flu/Influenza%20Recommendations).

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Dr. Charlotte Cowan is a board certified pediatrician and author of 5 medical children's stories that entertain, educate, and reassure both parent and child. Covering fever, colds, earaches, and sore throats, each book includes a *Parent Guide*. For information about her latest title, *The Moose with Loose Poops*, visit:

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