



British Heart  
Foundation

# Seasonal influenza (flu)

The virus which causes flu is highly infectious. You can catch it all year round but it is particularly common in the winter months, and can be very debilitating.

## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of flu include:

- fever (a temperature of 38°C or 100.4°F) or above
- a runny or blocked nose, sneezing
- a dry chesty cough and sore throat
- aches and pains in your muscles and joints
- headaches
- extreme tiredness
- loss of appetite.

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For most healthy people the symptoms of flu will begin to improve after 5 to 8 days. It will clear up on its own, but can be very severe for some people.

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## Who is at risk?

If you are in one of the following groups you are considered to be more 'at risk' of becoming very ill if you do catch the flu, increasing your chance of complications.

- anyone over the age of 65 years
- pregnant women
- children and adults with an underlying medical condition (for example heart or lung disease)
- children and adults with weakened immune systems.

## What should I do if I think I have flu?

If you have a heart condition, or are 'at risk' for another reason, and develop flu-like symptoms you should contact your GP surgery by telephone for advice. Flu is caused by a virus and not by bacteria, so antibiotics are of no benefit. However, your doctor may want to prescribe you antiviral medicines to lessen your symptoms and help you to recover quicker.

It is important that you speak to your GP or pharmacist before taking over the counter medicines such as pain killers and cough medicines. This is because some of the medicines to relieve the symptoms of the flu cannot be taken with those prescribed for some chronic diseases.

If you take warfarin, it's important to know that if you become unwell with the flu, or flu-like symptoms, it can affect your blood clotting rate (INR). If this happens to you speak to your GP or anticoagulation nurse about monitoring your INR.

## For more information:

### NHS Choices

For more information on flu and the flu jab

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/pages/flu-influenza-vaccine.aspx>

### Public Health England

For more information on flu strains

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

### BHF Heart Helpline

Our cardiac nurses and heart health advisors are here to answer your questions about anything heart related.

Call us on 0300 330 3311

Similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers.  
Lines are open 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday.

This information does not replace the advice that your doctor or nurse may give you. If you are worried about your heart health in any way, contact your GP or local healthcare provider.

## The flu vaccine

### Do I need to have the flu vaccine?

If you are in one of the 'at risk' groups (above) you are encouraged to have a flu jab every year. It won't prevent you from catching the flu, but it can help to protect you from the potentially serious complications that the virus can cause.

People with certain long-term conditions – such as heart disease – are encouraged to have their free flu jab. These include:

- heart disease
- lung disease – such as **asthma** and **chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)**
- liver disease
- kidney disease
- neurological disease – such as Parkinson's disease
- **diabetes**
- problems with your spleen or if you have had your spleen removed
- a weakened immune system due to a medical condition, or as a result of some medicines.

Ask your GP or practice nurse for more information about the vaccine and how to get it. It's also a good idea to avoid close contact with friends or relatives who have already got the virus.

### Who else should have the flu jab?

It is also recommended you have the flu jab if you:

- are living in a long-stay residential care home or other long-stay care facility
- receive a carer's allowance, or you are the main carer for an elderly or disabled person whose welfare may be at risk if you fall ill
- you are a healthcare worker.

(Children over the age of six months with a long term health condition and healthy children aged two, three and four are also eligible.)

### How does the vaccine work?

The flu vaccine contains inactivated strains of the flu virus, so it cannot cause flu. These strains of the flu virus are often grown on fertilised hens eggs, and you are more at risk of a reaction to the injectable flu vaccine if you have an egg allergy. (Egg-free flu jabs are now available, although your GP may arrange for you to have your vaccine in a hospital under the care of a specialist if your egg allergy is very severe.)

### Will I also need the pneumonia vaccine?

When you see your GP or practice nurse for a flu jab, ask whether you also need the pneumococcal vaccine, which protects you against some forms of pneumococcal infection including pneumonia.

The pneumococcal vaccine is available for free, but you only need to have it once, rather than every year.