

Seasonal Influenza (Flu)

Influenza (flu) is a contagious viral respiratory illness that is present year-round in the United States but is more common during the winter season (between December and February). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that about 8% of the U.S. population gets sick with the flu each year. Between the 2010-2011 and 2019-2020 flu seasons, an estimated **28 million symptomatic illnesses, including 420,000 hospitalizations and 35,000 deaths, occurred on average each season due to the flu.** This document provides recommendations for protecting workers who may become exposed to flu viruses.

Background

Seasonal flu is a common contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and sometimes the lungs. Flu viruses frequently mutate or change which can influence the severity and spread of infection, and on rare occasions lead to [pandemics](#). Please refer to the [CDC's weekly influenza surveillance report](#) for information on the current flu situation.

Symptoms

Flu symptoms can range from mild to severe, depending on which viruses are circulating. Symptoms include fever (or feeling feverish/chills), cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headaches, fatigue, and in some cases vomiting and diarrhea. It can be hard to distinguish flu symptoms from symptoms of [COVID-19](#) or other respiratory viruses.

Those at higher risk for severe illness or complications of the flu include adults 65 years and older, young children, pregnant women, and individuals with chronic conditions such as asthma or heart disease. The CDC estimates that 70% to 85% of flu-related deaths and 50% to 70% of flu-related hospitalizations occurred in people [65 years and older](#).

Transmission

Flu is most commonly spread from person-to-person through coughing, sneezing, and talking. People with the flu are most contagious in the 3-4 days after symptoms develop but may be

contagious from one day before symptoms begin up to 7 days after symptoms resolve. Flu can also be spread when touching the mouth, nose, or eyes after touching a contaminated surface. The virus can survive on hard surfaces like doorknobs for up to 48 hours.

Prevention and Control

Annual [vaccination](#) is the most effective way to reduce the risk of getting the flu. The CDC [recommends](#) that most people 6 months of age and older receive a flu vaccine each year. To maximize protection during flu season, vaccination by the end of October is recommended.

Protection usually develops within two weeks of vaccination. While some people who are vaccinated may still become ill, the vaccine can reduce the [severity](#) and [duration](#) of illness and decrease the spread to others.

The effectiveness of the vaccine varies from year-to-year based on how well it matches the circulating flu viruses. The CDC estimates vaccine effectiveness in the United State ranges from [40% to 60%](#) when vaccines are well-matched.

[Hand hygiene](#), [cough and sneeze etiquette](#), sanitizing common surfaces, and staying home when sick are also critical to prevent transmission. [Improving ventilation](#) can also reduce the inhalation risk of influenza, COVID-19, and other respiratory viruses.

Employees at increased risk of exposure

Healthcare workers are a high-risk group that is likely to be exposed to the flu through contact with sick patients. Some high-risk settings include hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, home care, or congregate settings such as rehabilitation and assisted living facilities.

Non-healthcare workers who work in crowded environments (e.g., congregate settings or shared housing) or under conditions where there is frequent contact with others may also have an increased risk of exposure. Workers at increased risk include those working in retail, hospitality, education, and transportation sectors.

Recommendations for Employers with workers at increased risk

Employers must provide a safe and healthy work environment. Employers should encourage all workers to get a flu vaccination, develop flexible leave policies that encourage sick workers to stay home without penalty and promote good hand hygiene and cough etiquette in the workplace. For additional recommendations please refer to [CDC's Preventing the Spread of Flu in the Workplace](#).

Additional information

Find more information on influenza at:

- [OSHA Seasonal Flu](#)
- [OSHA Seasonal Flu Vaccination](#)
- [CDC Influenza \(Flu\)](#)
- [WHO Influenza \(Seasonal\)](#)

Workers' Rights

Workers have the right to:

- Working conditions that do not pose a risk of serious harm.
- Receive information and training (in a language and vocabulary the worker understands) about workplace hazards, methods to prevent them, and the OSHA standards that apply to their workplace.
- Review records of work-related injuries and illnesses.
- File a complaint asking OSHA to inspect their workplace if they believe there is a serious hazard or that their employer is not following OSHA's rules. OSHA will keep all identities confidential.
- Exercise their rights under the law without retaliation, including reporting an injury or raising health and safety concerns with their employer or OSHA.

If a worker has been retaliated against for using their rights, they must file a whistleblower [complaint](#) with OSHA as soon as possible, but no later than 30 days after learning of the adverse action.

For additional information on worker rights, see [OSHA's Workers page](#).

How to Contact OSHA

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, employers are responsible for providing safe and healthful workplaces for their employees. OSHA's role is to ensure these conditions for America's workers by setting and enforcing standards and providing training, education, and assistance. For more information, visit www.osha.gov or call OSHA at 1-800-321-OSHA (6742), TTY 1-877-889-5627.

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999; teletypewriter (TTY) number: (877) 889-5627.

