

# Influenza and Pneumonia

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## What is Influenza?

Influenza or the “flu” is a potentially life threatening viral infection affecting the nose, throat, airways and lungs. It is contagious and is easily spread by having contact with the saliva of an infected person through coughing and sneezing. Influenza can cause mild to severe illness. At times, influenza can be so severe that it can result in death. The mortality rate caused by influenza has increased over the past 20 years. Older adults, young children and people with certain heart conditions are at a higher risk for developing severe complications from flu, including pneumonia.

Symptoms of influenza include sudden fever, dry cough, chills, sore muscles, sore throat, fatigue, headache, weakness and loss of appetite. Some older people may experience confusion when they have the flu. In many cases these symptoms are overlooked as non-threatening, leading many individuals to ignore them. The peak of symptoms is usually at day three to four, with the recovery period usually taking around seven to 10 days. If you develop persistent headaches and congestion, ongoing coughing, difficulty swallowing, vomiting and difficulties in breathing, seek consultation from a doctor for testing to determine if a more serious condition has developed (such as pneumonia).

## What is Pneumonia?

Complication of influenza often leads to pneumonia, either by the influenza virus itself or from a bacterial infection that starts because the individual is weakened from influenza. Pneumonia is an inflammation of the lungs that can be quite serious. The air sacs become filled with liquid (such as pus), making it difficult to breathe. Poor breathing results in a blockage of oxygen reaching the bloodstream which leads to the compromised ability of the cells in your body to work properly. Without enough oxygen in our blood, the cells do not function properly and this can lead to death. The risk of death from pneumonia is higher for people with heart disease, diabetes and weakened immune systems.

Symptoms of pneumonia can vary depending on the cause of the pneumonia (whether bacterial or viral) and the overall health of the person who has pneumonia.

Usually pneumonia causes a cough which produces sputum. With bacterial pneumonia, all or part of the lungs slowly fills with a liquid; this process is called consolidation. Some bacterial lung infections develop within a few hours and usually results in a high fever—sometimes going up to 39°C. Other symptoms can include shortness of breath, shivering, chills, headache, delirium (confusion), severe bad breath, muscle pain, weakness, chest pain—especially when breathing deeply—and blue lips and nail beds from lack of oxygen in the blood.

Viral pneumonias do not actually cause the lungs to fill with liquid. Instead, the lung tissue itself becomes inflamed. Viral pneumonias are usually milder than bacterial infections with the exception of the influenza virus, which can be very serious. Usually viral pneumonia results in symptoms such as dry cough, minimal sputum, headache, muscle pain, weakness and fatigue, moderate fever up to about 39°C, chills, shortness of breath, blue lips and nail beds.

## What can you do to prevent Influenza and Pneumonia?

Trying to prevent these illnesses is better than any cure. Once these conditions are contracted, medication and rest can only assist so much.

Influenza and pneumonia vaccines offer the best protection. Receiving an influenza vaccination once a year is the best way to prevent or minimize the flu. Because the influenza virus changes from year to year depending on the variability of the virus strain, you should receive the vaccination each year, usually in the fall before the flu season begins.

To dispel a common myth, you cannot get the flu from the influenza shot because the influenza vaccine is made from inactivated viruses. However, those with any allergy to eggs should contact their doctor before taking the vaccine. The vaccine is especially recommended for those considered “high risk.” This list includes any child between the ages of six to 23 months, anyone with a chronic condition in their lungs or heart, diabetes or kidney disease, people 65 years or older, pregnant women, and health care and household personnel that provide direct contact and care.



You only need the pneumococcal vaccine once and it is usually recommend for those older than 65 and for younger adults who smoke or who have asthma, diabetes, kidney problems or heart failure. Talk to your doctor to see if you would benefit from this vaccine. Pneumonia immunization can be given throughout the year at any time.

Prescribed medications that fight influenza virus may help prevent influenza in the event of an outbreak.

Avoid close contact with people infected by influenza and pneumonia. Stay at home when you are sick. Keeping your distance from others will prevent them from getting sick.

Frequent hand washing, particularly when you are around people who have colds and good hygiene can prevent spreading of bacteria that cause illness.

Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are frequently spread when you touch something that is contaminated with germs and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth.

Cover your nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.

Thoroughly clean surfaces in the house, since viruses can survive on

them and infect others who come in contact with them. Sanitize utensils, toys, equipment and furniture. This can help reduce the spread of germs in your house that can lead to serious illness.

Proper nutrition is very important such as eating a well balanced diet. Get plenty of rest, exercise and learn how to manage your stress. If you are generally in good health your immune system is in a better position to fight off illnesses.

## When to contact a doctor?

If despite all your efforts you become ill with influenza or pneumonia, take good care of yourself. Get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids. Pay careful attention to your symptoms. If your treatment at home does not improve symptoms within a few days or if symptoms worsen, you should contact your doctor. It is better to confront the illness early on rather than waiting for it to progress resulting in you becoming very sick. Contact your doctor immediately if you have shaking chills, trouble breathing or fast breathing or if you feel confused.

## did you KNOW?

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at **Be\_Well@nstu.ca**.

Please contact Erin at [ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca](mailto:ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca) to provide her with your NSTU email address. The **Be\_Well@nstu.ca** list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

