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College students and the flu

Every year, the flu spreads across college campuses nationwide. Close living quarters, shared restrooms, and a lot of social activities make a college student more likely to catch the flu.

This article will give you information about the flu and college students. This is not a substitute for medical advice from your health care provider.

Information

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF THE FLU?

A college student with the flu will most often have a fever of 100°F (37.8°C) or higher, and a sore throat or a cough. Other symptoms may include:

- Chills
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Runny nose
- Sore muscles
- Vomiting

Most people with milder symptoms should feel better within 3 to 4 days and do not need to see a provider.

Avoid contact with other people and drink plenty of fluids if you are having flu symptoms.

HOW DO I TREAT MY SYMPTOMS?

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) help lower fever. Check with your provider before taking acetaminophen or ibuprofen if you have liver disease.

- Take acetaminophen every 4 to 6 hours or as directed.
- Take ibuprofen every 6 to 8 hours or as directed.
- Do NOT use aspirin.

A fever does not need to come all the way down to normal to be helpful. Most people will feel better if their temperature drops by one degree Fahrenheit.

Over-the-counter cold medicines may relieve some symptoms. Throat lozenges or sprays that contain an anesthetic will help with a sore throat. Check your student health center's website for more information.

WHAT ABOUT ANTIVIRAL MEDICINES?

Most people with milder symptoms feel better within 3 to 4 days and do not need to take antiviral medicines.

Ask your provider if antiviral medicine is right for you. If you have any of the medical conditions below, you may be at risk for a more severe case of the flu:

- Lung disease (including asthma)
- Heart conditions (except high blood pressure)
- Kidney, liver, nerve, and muscle conditions
- Blood disorders (including sickle cell disease)
- Diabetes and other metabolic disorders
- A weakened immune system due to diseases (such as AIDS), radiation therapy, or certain medicines, including chemotherapy and corticosteroids
- Other long-term (chronic) medical problems

Antiviral medicines such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and baloxavir (Xofluza) are taken as pills. Zanamivir (Relenza) is taken by an inhaler. Peramivir (Rapivab) is available for intravenous use. Any of these may be used to treat some people who have the flu. These medicines work better if you start taking them within 2 days of your first symptoms.

WHEN CAN I RETURN TO SCHOOL?

You should be able to return to school when you're feeling well and have not had a fever for 24 hours (without taking acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or other medicines to lower your fever).

SHOULD I GET THE FLU VACCINE?

People should get the vaccine even if they've had a flu-like illness already. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone 6 months and older should receive the flu vaccine.

Receiving the flu vaccine will help protect you from getting the flu.

WHERE CAN I GET A FLU VACCINE?

Flu vaccines are often available at local health centers, provider's offices, and pharmacies. Ask your student health center, provider, pharmacy, or your place of work if they offer the flu vaccine.

HOW DO I AVOID CATCHING OR SPREADING FLU?

- Stay in your apartment, dorm room, or home for at least 24 hours after your fever goes away. Wear a mask if you leave your room.

- Do NOT share food, utensils, cups, or bottles.
- Cover your mouth with a tissue when coughing and throw it away after use.
- Cough into your sleeve if a tissue is not available.
- Carry alcohol-based hand sanitizer with you. Use it often during the day and always after touching your face.
- Do NOT touch your eyes, nose, and mouth.

WHEN SHOULD I SEE A PROVIDER?

Most college students do not need to see a provider when they have mild flu symptoms. This is because most college-age people are not at risk for a severe case.

If you feel you should see a provider, call the office first and tell them your symptoms. This helps the staff prepare for your visit, so that you do not spread germs to other people there.

If you have an increased risk of flu complications, contact your provider. Risk factors include:

- Long-term (chronic) lung problems (including asthma or COPD)
- Heart problems (except high blood pressure)
- Kidney disease or failure (long-term)
- Liver disease (long-term)
- Brain or nervous system disorder
- Blood disorders (including sickle cell disease)
- Diabetes and other metabolic disorders
- Weak immune system (such as people with AIDS, cancer, or an organ transplant; receiving chemotherapy or radiation therapy; or taking corticosteroid pills every day)

You may also want to talk to your provider if you are around others who may be at risk for a severe case of the flu, including people who:

- Live with or care for a child 6 months old or younger
- Work in a health care setting and have direct contact with patients
- Live with or care for someone with a long-term (chronic) medical problem who has not been vaccinated for the flu

Contact your provider right away or go to the emergency room if you have:

- Difficulty breathing, or shortness of breath
- Chest pain or abdominal pain
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion, or problems reasoning
- Severe vomiting, or vomiting that does not go away
- Flu-like symptoms improve, but then return with a fever and worse cough

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