

Protecting Against Influenza (Flu): Advice for Caregivers of Young Children

Children younger than 5 years of age – especially those younger than 2 years old – are at high risk of serious [flu-related complications](#). CDC estimates that since 2010, flu-related hospitalizations among children younger than 5 years ranged from [7,000 to 26,000](#) in the United States. Many more have to go to a doctor, an urgent care center, or the emergency room because of flu.

[Complications from flu](#) among children in this age group can include pneumonia (an illness where the lungs get infected and inflamed), dehydration (when a child's body loses too much water and salts, often because fluid losses are greater than fluid intake), worsening of long-term medical problems like heart disease or asthma, brain dysfunction such as encephalopathy, sinus problems, and ear infections. In rare cases, flu complications can lead to death.

To help prevent flu, CDC recommends that everyone aged 6 months and older get a yearly flu vaccine. Getting a yearly vaccine is especially important for young children because they are at increased risk of getting severe illness from flu.

Children Younger Than 6 Months at Highest Risk

Children younger than 6 months are at high risk of serious flu complications, but are too young to get a flu vaccine. Children younger than 6 months have the highest risk for being hospitalized from flu compared to children of other ages. Because influenza vaccines are not approved for children younger than 6 months old, protecting them from influenza is especially important. The advice below can help caregivers (for example, parents, teachers, babysitters, nannies) protect children younger than 6 months old from the flu.

Advice on How to Prevent Flu for Caregivers of Children Younger than 5 Years

1. Take Time to Get a Vaccine

- A yearly flu vaccine is the first and best way to protect against the flu.
- Flu vaccine has been shown to reduce the risk of flu illness, hospitalization and death in children.
- If the child you care for is 6 months or older, they should get a flu vaccine each year.
- Infants younger than 6 months are at high risk for serious flu-related complications, but are not approved for influenza vaccination.
- As a caregiver to a young child, you should get a flu vaccine, and make sure that other caregivers and all household members aged 6 months and older also get vaccinated each year. By getting vaccinated, you will be less likely to get the flu and therefore less likely to spread the flu to the child.

2. Take Everyday Preventive Actions

- Keep yourself and the child in your care away from people who are sick as much as you can.
- If you get flu symptoms, avoid contact with other people when possible, including the child in your care. Consider arranging for another caregiver to care for the child if possible, so that you don't make them sick.



- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze—throw the tissue away after you use it, and wash your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. If you are not near water, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs often spread this way.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, especially when someone is ill.

3. Antiviral Drugs Can Treat Flu Illness

- Antiviral drugs are available to treat flu in children and adults.
- Antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and shorten the time you are sick. They also may prevent serious flu complications.
- Antiviral drugs are different from antibiotics that treat bacterial infections. They are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) that are for treatment of the flu.
- Antiviral drugs work best when treatment is started within 2 days of becoming sick with flu, but starting them later can still be helpful, especially if the sick person is very sick with flu or is at high risk of serious flu complications. Follow your doctor’s instructions for taking these drugs.
- Treating people who are very sick with flu or who are at high risk of complications from the flu with antiviral drugs can mean the difference between having a milder illness versus a very serious illness that could result in a hospital stay.
- CDC recommends that people at high risk of serious flu complications, including children younger than 2 years, should be treated with flu antiviral drugs as soon as possible if they get sick with flu.

Advice for Caregivers of Children Younger than 5 Years Who Get the Flu

Flu may cause fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Young children also may have vomiting or diarrhea with flu symptoms. Some persons with flu may not have a fever. If you live with or care for a young child and you get flu symptoms, follow the precautions below to help prevent the spread of illness to the child in your care.

1. Remember How the Flu Spreads

- Flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. People with flu can spread it to others up to about 6 feet away. Less often, a person might get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching his or her own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.



2. Follow These Steps

- Call your health care professional if you develop [flu symptoms](#); they may prescribe antiviral drugs for flu, depending on factors including your age and overall health and the age and overall health of your young child.
- Try to minimize contact with the child in your care as much as possible, especially if the child in your care is younger than 2 years old or is an older child with chronic medical conditions. They are very vulnerable to flu.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when sneezing or coughing, and put your used tissue in a wastebasket, and wash your hands.
- Before engaging in any activity within about 6 feet of the child in your care (including feeding, changing, rocking, reading to your child) thoroughly wash and dry your hands. See more information about [preventing the spread of seasonal flu](#).

3. Be Watchful

- Observe the child in your care closely for signs and symptoms of respiratory illness. If your child develops a fever*, has shallow, slow, or rapid breathing, or is less responsive than normal, contact your child's doctor. If your child does become ill with flu, flu antiviral drugs can be used to treat children with influenza of all ages, and are most beneficial when antiviral treatment is started as soon as possible after the illness starts.

Footnote

**Many authorities use either 100 (37.8 degrees Celcius) or 100.4 F (38.0 degrees Celsius) as a cut-off for fever, but this number actually can range depending on factors such as the method of measurement and the age of the person, so other values for fever could be appropriate.*

