Influenza
An illness requiring droplet precautions

What is influenza?
Influenza, called “the flu,” is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent this illness is by getting a flu vaccination each fall.

Every year in the United States, on average:
- 5% to 20% of the population gets the flu.
- More than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications.
- About 36,000 people die from flu.

Some people, such as older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious flu complications. Some of these complications include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, or worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children may have sinus problems and ear infections as complications caused by the flu.

What are the symptoms of influenza?
The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1 to 4 days, with an average of about 2 days.

Symptoms of flu include:
- Fever (usually high).
- Headache.
- Extreme tiredness.
- Dry cough.
- Sore throat.
- Runny or stuffy nose.
- Muscle aches.
- Stomach symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, also can occur, but are more common in children than adults.

People with symptoms should practice “respiratory hygiene” by wearing a mask, washing their hands often, and disposing of tissues in wastebaskets when coming into a healthcare facility. Free “Cover Your Cough Kits” are available at the Information Desk and at clinic intake areas.
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How is influenza spread?

Flu viruses spread in tiny droplets produced when coughing and sneezing. The viruses usually spread from person to person through touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching the mouth or nose.

Most adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 days after becoming sick. This means that you can spread the flu before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Please tell your healthcare provider if you think you have the flu.

How is it diagnosed?

It is very difficult to distinguish the flu from other viral or bacterial causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. A test can confirm that an illness is influenza if the patient is tested within the first 2 to 3 days after symptoms begin. A doctor's exam may be needed to find out whether a person has another infection that is a complication of influenza.

How are others protected from influenza at the medical center?

At University of Washington Medical Center, we place a “Droplet Precautions” sign near the doorway of your room to alert healthcare workers and your visitors to observe expanded precautions when caring for you to protect other patients from “catching” the flu.

What does it mean to be in droplet precautions?

Healthcare workers and caregivers wear masks, gowns, and gloves when providing care.

Unvaccinated visitors are at risk of acquiring the flu; they should wear the protective gear – masks, gowns, and gloves.

Hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and environmental cleanliness are emphasized.

You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other departments in the hospital for treatment. If you leave your room, you will be asked to wash your hands and to wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a mask.

Please do not use the nutrition rooms while you are “in isolation.” When you want a snack or ice water, ask a member of your healthcare team to bring it to you.

When can droplet precautions be stopped?

Usually droplet precautions for influenza may be stopped after 5 days and you no longer have symptoms.

A follow-up viral laboratory test showing that you are no longer infected with the influenza virus may be required for patients who have compromised immune systems.