

Influenza



Causative agent

Influenza (flu) is an acute illness of the respiratory tract caused by flu viruses. It is usually more common in periods from January to March and from July to August in Hong Kong. Three types of flu viruses are recognised, namely A, B and C. Influenza A viruses can further be subtyped and influenza A (H1N1) pdm09 virus is one of them. In the spring of 2009, influenza A (H1N1) pdm09 virus emerged to cause illness in human and resulted in a pandemic in mid 2009. In August 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the world had moved into the post-pandemic period and the virus was expected to continue to circulate in the community as a seasonal flu strain for some years to come. Influenza A (H1N1) pdm09 virus has now become one of the seasonal flu strains in Hong Kong.

Clinical features

For healthy individuals, seasonal flu is usually self-limiting with recovery in 2 – 7 days. Symptoms may include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, muscle pain, fatigue and headache; some may also have vomiting and diarrhoea.



Cough is often severe and protracted but fever and other symptoms generally resolve in 5 – 7 days. However, flu can be a serious illness to the weak and frail or elderly people, and may be complicated by bronchitis, chest infection or even death.

Mode of transmission



Flu viruses mainly spread through droplets when infected people cough, sneeze or talk. The infection may also spread by direct contact with the secretions of infected persons.

Incubation period

Usually around 1 – 4 days

Infectious period

Infected persons may pass the viruses to other people 1 day before and up to 5 – 7 days after they develop symptoms. The period may be even longer in young children or severely immunocompromised persons.

Management

- Have adequate rest and drink plenty of water
- Refrain from work or school when having symptoms of flu. Seek medical advice if symptoms persist or deteriorate
- Antibiotics which target bacterial infection but not viral infection will not cure influenza or make recovery faster
- Antiviral agents may reduce severity and duration of illness but must be used under doctor's prescription



Prevention

Seasonal flu vaccination

- The vaccine is safe and effective in preventing seasonal flu and its complications
- As serious flu can occur even in healthy individuals, members of the public can consult their family doctors to receive seasonal flu vaccination for personal protection. Usually, it is suggested that vaccination should be received in autumn every year. About 2 weeks after vaccination, the body will develop a sufficient level of antibodies to protect against flu virus infection
- Emergence of new strains occurs from time to time at irregular intervals, which may cause outbreaks. Therefore, the WHO recommends appropriate formulation of flu vaccine for every flu season

Personal hygiene

- Wash hands with liquid soap and water properly
- When hands are not visibly soiled, clean hands with 70–80% alcohol-based handrub
- Wash or clean hands frequently, especially before touching the mouth, nose or eyes, or after touching public installations such as handrails or door knobs
- Cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing
- Dispose of soiled tissue paper properly in a lidded rubbish bin
- Wash hands thoroughly after sneezing or coughing
- Put on a surgical mask when having respiratory symptoms

Environmental hygiene

- Maintain good indoor ventilation
- When flu is prevalent, avoid going to crowded or poorly ventilated public places; high risk individuals may consider to put on surgical masks when staying in crowded or poorly ventilated public places

In addition, members of the public should also maintain balanced diet, exercise regularly, take adequate rest, do not smoke and avoid overstress.

