

## Conventional and Not So Conventional Ways To Avoid the Flu

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Influenza (the “flu”) is a contagious disease that can lead to feeling miserable, lost time from work, hospitalization and even death. The cause of the flu is exposure to the influenza virus combined with a failure of the immune system.

Influenza is spread mainly through respiratory droplets, by coughs and sneezes from infected people. The body’s first line of defense is a barrier defense. Our airways are covered with a layer of mucus that keeps viruses away from our cells. Tiny hairs sweep the contaminated mucus to the throat to be coughed up or swallowed down to the killing acid of the stomach. Smokers are especially susceptible to respiratory infections because the toxins in cigarette smoke paralyze and destroy these sweeper cells.

Once the barrier defense is breached, roving “Pac-Man-like” cells called macrophages gobble up any viruses outside the cells. However, once viruses invade our cells, they are hidden from this defense. Another defense, Interferon, is the body’s early warning system. It instructs infected cells to kill themselves and take the virus down with them which cause symptoms of high fever, fatigue and muscle aches. This self-destruct mode leads to the death of the respiratory lining that triggers fits of coughing. An important protective mechanism is formation of antibodies. Exposure to the flu and the flu vaccine stimulates our bodies to develop antibodies against flu virus to fend off the viral assault. However, it takes time for our bodies to develop virus-specific antibodies. (Source: *Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching* by Michael Greger, M.D.)

The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) advises everyone six months of age and older to receive a yearly flu vaccine. Vaccination is especially important for people at high risk, including people over 65 years’ old, pregnant women, and those with heart disease, lung disease and diabetes. Influenza weakens defense mechanisms against bacterial infections. Bacterial pneumonia is typically how high risk individuals die from the flu.

Each year a new vaccine is formulated to target three flu strains thought to be most likely to occur during the upcoming flu season. The 2011-2012 vaccine will protect against an influenza A H3N2 virus, an influenza B virus, and the H1N1 virus that caused the 2009-2010 pandemic.

In addition to receiving a flu vaccine, you can reduce your risk of contracting influenza by consistently practicing some simple behaviors:

1. Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
2. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with your hands.
3. Avoid close contact with sick people. Each cough and sneeze releases billions of viruses from the body.
4. Avoid places and events with crowds of people to reduce exposure.
5. If you do contract the flu, see your doctor. You may be prescribed anti-viral medication which can reduce and prevent serious complications.
6. If you are sick with a flu-like illness, stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone.
7. Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze, and then wash your hands with soap and water. If you don't have a tissue, cough into your sleeve, not your hand.

Some less conventional interventions may help protect you from the flu by strengthening your barrier defenses and your immune system.

1. Wash your nasal passages at least twice per day. This can be accomplished using saline nasal spray or a Neti pot to irrigate your nasal passages.
2. Skip antihistamines which dry nasal membranes, thicken mucus and slow the mucus flow.
3. Eat vitamin-rich foods, nutritious foods. This includes immune-boosting flu fighters such as mushrooms, red bell peppers, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, Brazil nuts, whole grains, and beans. Cook up nourishing soups with immunity-boosting garlic, hot curry, pepper, chili peppers or ginger.
4. Drink green tea which primes the immune blood cells.
5. Get more sleep. People who sleep less than seven hours at night are nearly three times more likely to contract the common cold than those getting eight hours or more.
6. Manage your stressors because chronic stress suppresses the immune system.
7. Consider taking a vitamin D supplement regularly on days you do not have sun exposure.
8. Hanging out with cheerful friends, watching humorous movies, sharing jokes and exposing yourself to bright lights can boost your immunity.
9. If your water source is a well, filter your water. Arsenic can lower your immune response to flu.



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We wish you the best of health and wellness this flu season!

If you have other questions about vaccinations or want to schedule your flu vaccine, call Quad City Occupational Health (QCOH) at 563-322-2103 in Davenport or 563-242-2900 in Clinton. QCOH is an occupational health clinic that provides a variety of services to local employers and their employees with a special focus on overall health and wellness, and consistently supports engagement in health care decisions and health-related behaviors. We are located at 1820 W 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in Davenport and 1647 Lincoln Way in Clinton. Our team of occupational health specialists is trained, committed, and enthusiastic, with solutions to keep employees fit and ready for work. Ask your employer to send you to Quad City Occupational Health, a division of Braaten Health LLC for the quality care you deserve.