Influenza
Fact Sheet

Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention
An Office of the Department of Health and Human Services

What is influenza (flu)?
Influenza, commonly called "the flu," is caused by the influenza virus, which infects the nose, throat, and lungs. Unlike many other viruses such as the common cold, the flu causes severe illness and life-threatening complications in many people.

What are the symptoms of the flu?
Flu is a respiratory illness. Symptoms of flu include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Children can have additional symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults. Although the term "stomach flu" is sometimes used to describe vomiting, nausea, or diarrhea, these illnesses are caused by other viruses, bacteria, or possibly parasites, and are rarely related to the flu.

When is the flu season in Maine?
The flu season is generally from October through May, although flu may be found year round. Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) monitors flu activity and provides reports each week from October through May.

How does the flu spread?
The main way the virus is spread is from person to person in droplets of coughs and sneezes. When a person coughs or sneezes the droplets can travel up to 3 feet and land on the mouth or nose of others. It is also possible to get the flu from touching a surface that has flu virus on it, and then touching your own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

Does the flu have complications?
Yes. Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections as complications from the flu. Those aged less than five years, 65 years and older and persons of any age with chronic medical conditions are at highest risk for serious complications of flu.

How can I prevent getting the flu?
The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each year. There are two types of vaccines:

- The "flu shot" – an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people 6 months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine – a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for "Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine"). LAIV is approved for use in healthy people 2 years to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

About two weeks after getting the vaccine, antibodies develop that protect against the flu. Flu vaccines will not protect against other viral illnesses

What are other steps that can be taken to prevent the flu?
Maine CDC recommends following the "No Flu 4 You" Approach:

1. Wash your hands
2. Cover your cough
3. Stay home when you are sick
4. Get vaccinated

How soon will I get sick if I am exposed to the flu?
The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is one to four days, with an average of two days.

How do I find out if I have the flu?
It is hard to tell the flu from other causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. A lab test can confirm that an illness is the flu if the patient is tested within the first two to three days after symptoms begin. In addition, a doctor's exam may be needed to determine whether a person has another infection that is a complication of the flu.

If I got the flu last year, will I have immunity against the flu this year?
In general, a person who is infected with a flu virus one year will have some immunity to closely related viruses that may persist for one or more years. For example, if someone was infected with a specific strain of flu that circulates during one year, they are likely to have some natural immunity that will give them protection if they are exposed to that strain or a closely related strain again during the next year. The degree of protection depends on the health of the person involved. Young and healthy people with strong immune systems will likely have good immunity against the same or closely related strains of virus from one year to the next. However, people with weakened immune systems are less likely to have immunity that carries over in other years.

It's important to remember that flu viruses are constantly changing so antibody made against one strain will become less effective against new strains as they evolve over time. In addition, there are different types of flu viruses circulating and different strains within virus types, and the same type of flu virus does not necessarily circulate each year.

How long is a person with flu virus contagious?
The period when an infected person is contagious depends on the age and health of the person. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others from 1 day prior to becoming sick to 5 days after they first develop symptoms. Some young children and people with weakened immune systems may be contagious for longer than a week.

How many people get sick or die from the flu every year?
Each flu season is unique, but it is estimated that, on average, approximately 5% to 20% of U.S. residents get the flu, and more than 200,000 persons are hospitalized for flu-related complications each year. About 36,000 Americans die on average per year from the complications of flu.

How long can flu viruses live on hard surfaces (such as books and doorknobs)?
Flu viruses generally can survive on hard surfaces for between 2 and 8 hours.

What kills the flu virus?
Flu virus is killed by heat (167-212°F [75-100°C]). In addition, chlorine, hydrogen peroxide, soaps, iodine-based antiseptics, and alcohols are effective against flu viruses if used properly. For example, wipes or gels with alcohol in them can be used to clean hands. The gels should be rubbed until they are dry.

What is novel or variant flu?
Novel or variant flu is any type of flu strain that is not commonly seen. This can include flu viruses that are normally found in pigs, birds, dogs, bats or other animals. How bad the novel strain is depends on many things, and may be different for each novel type.

Symptoms of novel flu are usually the same as regular flu. Lab testing is required to find out if a strain is a common one, or a novel one. The “No Flu 4 You” approach should also be used to prevent novel flu.

Where can I get more information?
For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website www.maineflu.gov. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - http://www.cdc.gov/flu – is another excellent source of health information.