Flu Facts

What is Influenza?
Influenza is commonly called the "flu". It is an infection of upper respiratory tract caused by one of several different strains of influenza viruses. It is a very contagious illness and can be more serious than the common cold (see URI handout), especially in children, the elderly, and those with chronic illnesses. Influenza epidemics occur in a seasonal pattern, usually late fall and winter months.

Symptoms
Initial symptoms may be those of the common cold. Soon this can be followed by any or all of the following: fever and chills with body temperatures averaging 102-103°F, headache, body aches, a prominent dry cough, sore throat, fatigue, runny nose, and loss of appetite. These symptoms may be at their worst for 2-4 days and can last for 5-7 days. The cough may take even longer to resolve. It often may takes over one week to feel like you are back to your normal health.

Influenza Vaccination
Each year vaccines are available in the fall that are given to help protect against the type of flu virus that is anticipated to cause epidemics for that year. Vaccination can help prevent Influenza, but does it NOT protect against other viral infections which are sometimes called "the flu." This includes colds, coughs, and gastroenteritis.

Prevention
The flu virus is spread by sneezing, coughing, and by hand-to-hand contact with people or objects that are contaminated with the virus. The virus can live on computer keyboards, pens, books, and coffee cups for several hours and can be acquired from such objects. Knowing how flu viruses are spread can help with some common sense prevention practices.

1. Consider a yearly influenza vaccination to prevent the flu.
2. Wash your hands frequently.
3. Discard tissues right after use.
4. Use separate towels and wash clothes.
5. Avoid sharing food, eating and drinking utensils with others.

Do Antibiotics Help Influenza?
No. Antibiotics play no role in treating influenza, the common cold, or any other virus. Antibiotics only work against illnesses caused by bacteria. Viruses cause influenza. Using antibiotics when they are not necessary has led to the growth of several strains of common bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics. For these and other reasons, it is important to limit the use of antibiotics to situations in which they are necessary.

What is NOT influenza?
Gastroenteritis, commonly known as "stomach flu" with vomiting and diarrhea and most other illnesses including the common cold.
Medications
Currently there are a few specific medications that can be taken to shorten the duration of an influenza illness; including Tamiflu, Relenza, Amantidine, and Rimantidine. They do not cure influenza and all must be taken in the first 48 hours of an illness. It is necessary to see a health care provider to obtain these prescription medicines.

The following medications mentioned in this brochure are aimed at reducing or relieving common symptoms of discomfort from influenza.

General Discomfort (headache, fever, body ache)
Analgesics can relieve pain and reduce fever.
Examples:
- Acetaminophen e.g. (Tylenol)
- Ibuprofen, e.g. (Advil, Nuprin)

Cough
Coughing is a reflex action in response to irritation of the breathing tubes. Cough medicines do not cure a cough. They may only help suppress it.
Examples:
- Robitussin DM
- Nyquil
- Vicks 44D

Home Remedies (for flu symptoms)

Fluids: Drink 8 to 10 glasses of liquids a day. Water and fruit juice are fine.
Steam: Take a hot steamy shower or use a cold air vaporizer.
Rest: Try to get at least 8 hours of sleep each night.

When to Go to the Doctor
It's time for a visit when you have the following symptoms:
- If you have a chronic illness that may be worsened by the flu.
- Persistent fever >103°F
- Severe chest pain
- Severe shortness of breath
- Persistent severe headache
- Symptoms that persist longer than 7-10 days.