What is influenza?
Influenza (the flu) is a viral infection of the nose, throat, bronchial tubes and lungs. There are two main types of influenza virus: A and B. Type A virus tends to cause more severe illness than type B. Each type includes many different strains which tend to change each year.

When does influenza occur?
In temperate climate regions, epidemics of influenza occur nearly annually in the winter (from November through March in the Northern Hemisphere and from April through September in the Southern Hemisphere). In the tropics, the flu can occur any time of year.

Who gets influenza?
Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people) and serious complications from influenza can happen at any age.

How is it spread?
The flu is spread, or transmitted, when a person who has the flu coughs or sneezes and sends flu virus into the air and other people inhale the virus. The virus enters the nose, throat or lungs of the other people and begins to multiply, causing symptoms of influenza. Influenza may, less often, be spread when a person touches a surface that has flu virus on it (a door handle, for instance) and then touches his or her nose or mouth.

What are the symptoms of influenza?
Typical flu symptoms include sudden onset of body aches, fever and respiratory symptoms (such as cough, sore throat, or runny nose). While vomiting, diarrhea and being "sick to your stomach" can sometimes be related to the flu (particularly in children), these problems are rarely the main symptoms of influenza and they are often due to infection with a different virus or a bacteria or parasite. Most people who get influenza will recover in one to two weeks, but some people will develop life-threatening complications as a result of the flu.

What are some possible complications from an infection with influenza?
People aged 65 years and older, people of any age with chronic medical conditions and very young children are more likely to get complications from influenza. Women in the second or third trimester of pregnancy are also at increased risk from complications of the flu. Some of the complications caused by flu include 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. Uncommon complications of influenza include myositis, myocarditis and Reye syndrome (generally associated with the use of aspirin and other salicylate-containing medications in children and adolescents with influenza-like illness). Approximately 36,000 people die each year in the United States from the flu or related complications.

How soon do symptoms appear?
The incubation period for influenza is one to four days.

How is influenza 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 two to three days after symptoms begin. In addition, a doctor's examination may be needed to determine whether a person has another infection that is a complication of influenza.

When and for how long is a person able to spread influenza?
The period when an infected person is contagious depends on the person. Adults may be contagious from one day before becoming ill to 3 to 7 days after they develop symptoms. Some children are contagious for longer than a week.

Does past infection with influenza make a person immune?
Generally, no. The viruses that cause flu frequently change, so people who have been infected or given a flu shot in previous years may become infected with a new strain. Because of this, and because any immunity produced by the flu shot may decrease in the year after vaccination, people should be vaccinated against the flu every year.

Who should be vaccinated?
Annual vaccination against influenza is recommended for persons at high risk for influenza-associated complications (such as individuals ≥50 years of age, children aged 6 months through 18 years of age, pregnant women, those of any age with certain chronic medical conditions, and people who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities) and their close contacts (people who live with or care for those at high risk).

What is the treatment for influenza?
An individual who becomes sick with the flu should rest, drink plenty of liquids, avoid using alcohol and tobacco, and take medication to relieve the symptoms of the flu. (Never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms (and particularly fever) without first speaking to your doctor. Giving aspirin to children and teenagers who have influenza can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome.)

Influenza is caused by a virus, so antibiotics don't work to cure it. Although a flu shot is the best way to prevent the flu, antiviral drugs are other tools that can be used to help prevent and treat influenza. All of these drugs must be prescribed by a doctor. These drugs are effective against flu viruses, but they are not effective against other viruses or bacteria that can cause symptoms similar to influenza. These drugs are not effective for treating bacterial infections that can occur as complications of influenza.

What can be done to control or prevent influenza?
The single best way to prevent the flu is for individuals, especially persons at high risk for serious complications from the flu, to get a flu shot each fall. Occasionally, physicians may prescribe antiviral medications to prevent some individuals from getting the flu.