What should I do about Flu?

What is flu?
How do you catch flu?
What should you do if you think you have flu?

GET THE RIGHT TREATMENT.
What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza (flu) is an illness caused by a virus.

There is some flu around every winter. Every few years an influenza epidemic occurs which lasts a few weeks. And very occasionally there is a world-wide epidemic (a pandemic) caused by the emergence of a new virus.
How is flu spread?

By coughs and sneezes from people who have already caught the virus. Infected droplets in the air are then breathed in by other people. Viruses such as flu can also be picked up on your hands and spread by touching your nose or eyes. Flu can spread very rapidly.

How do I know if I have flu?

Flu is more than a heavy cold.

- Flu usually starts suddenly
- Typical symptoms include:
  - high fever
  - chills
  - headache
  - aching limbs
  - sore throat
  - cough
  - general weakness
How long will it last?
You may feel ill and have a temperature for up to a week. You could feel weak and in low spirits for several weeks longer.

How serious is flu? What should I do if I get it?
For most people flu is a nasty experience but not life-threatening. If you are under 65 and normally well, the best way to treat flu is to:

• Stay at home and rest – you will recover more quickly

• Drink plenty of non-alcoholic liquids to replace the fluid lost in sweating

• Eat what you can

• Remember antibiotics won’t help unless there are complications. A painkiller such as paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen will help to relieve the headache and muscle pains and reduce your temperature (but do not give aspirin to children under 12 years). Always follow the instructions on any medicines.

• You can make a feverish child more comfortable by sponging them with tepid (not cold) water.

• If you live on your own, tell a friend or neighbour you are ill so that they can check on you, bring in some food or do essential shopping.
Try not to call out your doctor, unless

- Your temperature does not settle after 4-5 days
- Your condition deteriorates
- You think you are seriously ill
- You develop chest pain or become short of breath
- You are really worried: you might consider discussing your symptoms over the telephone rather than making an appointment or requesting a visit. You can also phone NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 or visit the NHS Direct website on www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk for more information.

*Flu can be serious, however, for some people*

Flu is more likely to be serious:

- If you are 65 years old or over
- Whatever your age, if you suffer from:
  - a chronic chest or heart complaint (including asthma)
  - chronic kidney disease
  - diabetes
- lowered immunity due to disease or treatment (such as steroid medication, cancer treatment or having your spleen taken out)
- any other serious medical condition
- If you live in an old people’s or nursing home (because flu can spread very fast among the residents).

If you fall in one of these groups, prevention is better than cure. You should ask your doctor about having a free flu jab at the beginning of every winter. If you think you are in one of the groups recommended to have a flu vaccination, ask your doctor, or look out for the Department of Health leaflet *Flu Vaccination*.

If you are in one of these groups and you do get flu (a small number of people may get flu in spite of having a flu jab), there are some antiviral drugs that may lessen your illness. You have to start the treatment quickly (within 48 hours of your symptoms starting), so call your doctor’s surgery, call NHS Direct (0845 46 47) or see your local pharmacist for advice. In any case, it is wise to let your doctor know you are ill so that he/she can keep an eye on you in case of complications.
What else can I do?

If you know there is flu around:

- Keep your home medicine chest well stocked with cold or flu remedies and consider purchasing a clinical thermometer – ask your pharmacist for advice.

- Watch out for signs that a neighbour may be ill, for example, milk bottles on the doorstep or curtains not open.

- Offer to make drinks or do the shopping for a sick neighbour if they live alone or if you think they may not be able to cope.

Can I avoid getting flu?

It is difficult to avoid flu if there is an epidemic. Keeping away from crowded places can help. Wash your hands before touching your eyes or nose. You could also encourage people who are ill with flu to stay at home – they are likely to get better more quickly, and it will help to prevent the virus spreading.

If you are in one of the risk groups recommended to be immunised against flu, see your doctor to arrange to have your jab sooner rather than later – do not wait for an epidemic.