What is the Flu?
Influenza, also called the flu, is a respiratory infection caused by a virus. It is a common, contagious illness that is like a very bad cold. The symptoms are high fever (over 100°F), cough, sore throat, stuffy or runny nose, muscle pain, and weakness.

Every year there are flu epidemics around the world that result in millions of people getting the flu; roughly 5-20% of the population gets the flu each year.

Most people who get the flu feel sick for about a week before they recover, but thousands of people die each year from influenza. The people most at risk are the very, very young and the very, very old. Some epidemic years are much worse than others because the virus that year affects people more.

How the Flu Spreads
The flu, like a cold, spreads very easily from person to person by coughing and sneezing.

The virus spreads through the air and onto surfaces when virus-containing droplets are expelled by the Sneezes and coughs of infected people. Also, if infected people sneeze or cough into their hands and then touch an item, viruses remain on that object for a long time. Others who later touch that object can get the virus on their hand, and if they touch their mouth, nose or eyes, the virus enters their body and they can get sick.

The Incubation Period
Once you are exposed to the flu virus, the virus tries to invade a cell in your respiratory system. If it gets inside a cell it multiplies quickly, cloning itself many times, meanwhile damaging the host cell. The newly-made viruses leave the damaged cell and invade other cells. This process continues and the virus spreads quickly.

It can take two or more days for the virus to reproduce enough to do enough damage to cause symptoms to appear -- this time period is called the incubation period. During the incubation period you do not feel sick, but you can spread the virus to others.

How to Limit the Spread of the Flu and Protect Yourself
To reduce the risk of getting or spreading the flu, do the following:

- Wash your hands often -- use soap and water, and wash for at least 20 seconds (this is as long as it takes to sing the Happy Birthday song twice).
- When you can't wash your hands, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, mouth, and nose.
- Cover your sneezes and coughs with a tissue, or use the inside of your elbow. DO NOT USE YOUR BARE HANDS!
- Do not go to school if you are sick!

Most people recover from the flu when their immune system kills the invading virus. There are also flu vaccines that help protect people from a specific strain of the flu. The flu virus mutates all the time, so new vaccines are required for different strains of the virus. See your doctor for advice about vaccinations and about treating the flu.