

Black Clergy Health Brief: A Resource for Pastors
Provided by Health Committee of The Black Clergy of Philadelphia and Vicinity
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DECEMBER FOCUS: INFLUENZA (“THE FLU”)

DID YOU KNOW?

- As of December 3, 2022 The Pennsylvania Department of Health (PDOH) has reported that flu activity in PA during this flu season, when compared to the corresponding week in the past eight flu seasons is significantly higher (on the order of eight times higher).¹
- The percent of Emergency Department visits in PA associated with flu-like illness has increased.
- Eight confirmed influenza-associated deaths have been reported in PA during the current season.
- From October 2 and December 3, 2022 there were 8,387 confirmed cases in Philadelphia County.²
- People are getting flu at a higher rate this year than in 2017-2018, which was the season that at its peak, one in ten deaths in Philadelphia were flu related.
- While in general flu vaccinations in the US for ages 18+ are up from 2021, African Americans still trail the overall population in percentage vaccinated. (26.3% for overall, 23.5 % for African Americans.)³
- Annually, by the end of flu season, only about 50% of Americans get a flu shot. ⁴

WHAT IS THE INFLUENZA (THE FLU)?

- Influenza (the flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs.
- There are four known types of flu viruses: Types A, B, C and D. Types A and B are the main types that routinely spread in people (human influenza viruses) and that are known to cause seasonal epidemics. ⁵ Influenza C virus infections generally cause mild illness and are not thought to cause human epidemics. Influenza D viruses primarily affect cattle and are not known to infect or cause illness in people.⁶
- Type A viruses are divided into subtypes based on two proteins on the surface of the virus: hemagglutinin (H) and neuraminidase (N). A(H1N1) and A(H3N2) are the two main subtypes.
- Type B viruses are not divided into subtypes, but instead are further classified into two lineages: B/Yamagata and B/Victoria.
- The dominant types and subtypes vary from year to year.

FLU ILLNESS AND SYMPTOMS

Influenza (flu) can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Flu symptoms usually come on suddenly. People who have flu often feel some or all of these symptoms:

- fever or feeling feverish/chills
- cough and/or sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- muscle or body aches
- NOTE: There are *many other viruses besides the flu* that can result in influenza-like illness (ILI) that spread during flu season.
- headaches
- fatigue (tiredness)
- vomiting, diarrhea (more in children)

THE SPREAD OF THE FLU

- Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by tiny droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze, or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby.
- Less often, a person might get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose or possibly their eyes.
- People with flu are most contagious in the first 3-4 days after their illness begins.
- Some otherwise healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning one day before symptoms develop.

FLU VACCINES (“FLU SHOTS”)⁷

- Flu shots are vaccines that effectively protect against the four flu viruses *that research indicates will be most common* during the upcoming season.
- Flu vaccines generally protect from getting the flu. If you do get sick, vaccines can reduce the severity.⁸
- It is generally recommended that everyone 6 months or older be vaccinated before the end of October, however any time before peak is encouraged. (The peak of flu season in February.)
- It is especially important for people at higher risk of serious flu complications such as young children, pregnant people, people with certain chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes or heart and lung disease, and people 65 years and older to get the vaccine.
- You cannot get the flu from a flu shot. However flu-like side effects may be experienced due to (a) the body’s immune system activating antibodies, or (b) another strain of flu infecting the body.
- Seasonal flu vaccines will not protect against infection and illness caused by other viruses that also can cause flu-like symptoms.

TREATING THE FLU WITH ANTIVIRAL DRUGS⁹

- Flu Antivirals are prescription-only drugs to be taken after infection has taken place to fight the virus, lessen its impact, and to shorten time of sickness.
- Antivirals are not the same as antibiotics (which fight bacterial infections, not viruses).
- Flu antivirals only fight the flu, not other flu-like illnesses or COVID 19.

PERSONAL CHOICES THAT CAN HELP PREVENT THE SPREAD OF THE FLU

- Frequent handwashing, coughing and sneezing into your elbow, and frequently washing and disinfecting high-touch surfaces.
- Avoid contact with people who are sick. If you have symptoms, stay out of circulation and avoid handshaking, hugging, and close contact.
- Avoid touching your mouth, nose and eyes as much as possible before washing your hands.
- Wear a mask.

HOW CAN THE CHURCH HELP TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF THE FLU?

- Sponsor Flu Shot Clinics.
- Encourage congregation members to get flu shots.
- Share factual information and dispel myths about the flu and flu shots.
- Continue some of the physical distancing practices learned during the COVID pandemic, including
 - Discourage excessive congregating.
 - Encourage pew spacing.
 - Give people grace to stay home if they are feeling sick.
- Encourage mask wearing.

“Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.” (3 John 2)

Disclaimer: The contents of this document are for informational purposes only and not intended to be a substitute for medical guidance. Please consult your primary care provider or licensed health practitioner for all health and medical advice.

¹ <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Flu/Pages/2022-23-Flu.aspx>

² <https://hip.phila.gov/data-reports-statistics/influenza/>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/fluview/dashboard/vaccination-adult-coverage.html>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/keyfacts.htm#give-me-flu>

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/index.html>

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/viruses/types.htm>

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/season/faq-flu-season-2022-2023.htm>

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/keyfacts.htm#give-me-flu>

⁹ <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/treatment/index.html>