To help protect others, know how long to stay home sick

Know when to seek medical help

While most seasonal flu illness is mild, there are situations where you, or a family member, should seek medical advice or care. Examples:

- You are a member of a group of people who are at high risk for flu complications.
- You live with or have close contact with a high-risk person.
- You develop emergency warning signs.

If you believe you have an emergency, always dial 9-1-1.

Staying home when you’re sick and avoiding contact with others — except to get medical care — is a key way to help slow the spread of flu, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

An important part of the equation is knowing just how long to stay home with flu-like symptoms, so as to help avoid infecting others.

In October 2009, the CDC updated its guidance for the general public on this topic. Except to get medical care, the agency now recommends that people with flu-like illness remain at home for at least 24 hours after their fever is gone, without the use of fever-reducing medications (such as Tylenol). In this situation, a fever is considered a body temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or more.

The new guidelines apply to businesses, schools, camps and other mass gatherings where the majority of people present are not at increased risk for influenza complications. People recovering from flu-like symptoms may need to use more stringent guidelines about when they can return to a setting with high-risk people.

Why it’s important to stay home

Staying home can help reduce influenza's spread.
Data collected by CDC during the spring found that most people who were infected but not hospitalized with flu had a fever that lasted two to four days. Under the new CDC guidelines, that means a sick person would need to stay home for three to five days in most cases.

An elevated fever is associated with increased viral “shedding,” the medical term for reproduction and excretion of the influenza virus from the host. Most people will still continue shedding for 24 hours after their fever subsides, according to the CDC, although at a lower rate than during the fever itself.

Specifically, the CDC says, “The determination of readiness to return to school, businesses, or other community settings should be made when at least 24 hours have passed since the ill person’s temperature first remained normal without the use of (fever-reducing) medications” such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen or naproxen. Aspirin is not recommended for children or teens with flu.

The CDC says its guidelines apply even if a person has been prescribed antiviral medications.

**What to do if you have to leave the house**

Besides staying home from work or school, people with flu-like illness also avoid:

- travel
- shopping
- social events, and
- public gatherings.

If you must leave home for medical care or other crucial tasks that no one else can do, the CDC recommends wearing a face mask and/or paying close attention to covering your coughs and cleaning your hands.

You may be able to avoid leaving the comfort of bed entirely — and avoid making trips out in public when you are sick and contagious — by preparing in advance for the flu season. That means stocking up on a week’s worth of items that you'd use if you fell ill, such as over-the-counter medicines, alcohol-based hand rubs and tissues.

**What to do when you feel better**

Some people may shed the flu virus longer than 24 hours after their fever goes away. Others may not even get a fever at all when infected with influenza. So when returning to work or school, it’s important to be especially vigilant about covering your