

Knowing Your Flu Facts

As most of you are probably aware, over the past few months there has been a lot of talk surrounding the new H1N1 flu virus, better known as “swine flu”. With all of the information out there it can be difficult to find exactly what you need to know. Having a good understanding of the flu’s cause, symptoms, and treatment is not only necessary to prevent spread of the infection, but also important in ensuring a quick recovery if you were to contract the virus.

The H1N1 flu is a respiratory infection caused by the influenza A virus that normally caused infection in pigs. This recent outbreak however, involves a new strain of the virus that has allowed it to spread to humans, and then from humans to humans. This virus may be caught by either inhaling infected droplets found in the air, or transferring live virus to your eyes, nose, or mouth. Once the virus enters your body it will infect the numerous cells that line your nose, throat and lungs, leading to its classic symptoms.

Symptoms of the H1N1 flu will usually start 3 to 5 days after being exposed to the virus, and continue for approximately 1 week. It is important to know that you can pass the virus to other people for approximately 8 days, starting the day before you get sick up until you recover. Some of the more common symptoms of this flu include fever, cough, sore throat, headache, tiredness, diarrhea, and vomiting.

Although there are ways to treat the flu once you are infected, the best thing you can do is to prevent an infection from happening in the first place. One of the simplest yet most important things you can do is to properly wash your hands as often as possible. Soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer should be used to eliminate the virus, as it is able to survive for two or more hours on common surfaces such as doorknobs and counter-tops. Another simple way to prevent an infection is to avoid contact with sick people. This can be done by staying away from large crowds as well as family and friends that may have contracted the virus. It is worth noting that the seasonal flu shot will not protect against the H1N1 flu, but research is currently being done to bring a new vaccine to the market. A vaccine is a chemical that provides us with immunity against the flu virus by stimulating our body to produce antibodies.

Even when taking the right precautions some people may still become infected with the H1N1 virus. As with most cases of the flu, treatment is generally not needed apart from providing relief for your symptoms. This is in contrast to bacterial infections in which antibiotics are commonly prescribed. Some of the following are things that you can do at home can help ease your flu symptoms. First you should drink plenty of liquids (water, juice, and soup) to prevent dehydration. Next you should try and get as much rest as possible, as sleep will help your immune system better fight off infection. Finally over-the-counter pain relievers like Tylenol® and Advil® can be used if necessary.

With all of the media attention surrounding the new H1N1 influenza virus, it is sometimes difficult knowing which facts are most important. Always remember to ask your community pharmacist for more information. Your health is our number one priority!

Daniel Pike
Pharmacist