

Preparing Yourself for Flu Season

As fall sets in for another year many people are starting to talk about influenza, better known as “the flu”. Given the amount of media coverage surrounding H1N1 last year there seems to be a heightened sense of awareness of influenza. The flu and its complications can be very serious, taking the lives of tens of thousands of people in the US each year. That being said I feel it is important to have a good understanding of the flu’s cause, symptoms, prevention and treatment so you can not only prevent the spread of the infection, but also ensure a quick recovery if you were to contract the virus.

Influenza is a viral infection that affects our respiratory system (nose, throat, and lungs). This differs from other stomach viruses that cause diarrhea and vomiting. 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. Some of these more common symptoms include; fever, chills, dry cough, sore throat, headache, and aching muscles. It is important to know that early on the flu may seem like a common cold, causing a runny nose, sneezing, and a sore throat. The difference is that a cold tends to develop quite slowly and be more of a nuisance, compared to the flu that comes on suddenly and makes you feel much worse.

There are certain individuals that are at a higher risk of developing complications from the flu. These people include younger children, older adults, pregnant women, individuals with weakened immune systems, and those with chronic illnesses (asthma, diabetes, or heart problems). Some of the more common complications of the flu include pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus infections, and ear infections. It is important that if you develop flu-like symptoms and are at risk of complications, that you contact your physician.

The best thing you can do is 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.

The influenza vaccine or “flu shot” is a highly recommended prevention strategy for both adults and children. It provides us with immunity against the flu virus by stimulating our body to produce its own antibodies. It is worth noting that the H1N1 influenza virus responsible for last year’s pandemic is included in this year’s seasonal flu vaccine.

Now, upon receiving appropriate training and certification, certain pharmacists will be administering the flu shot in their respective pharmacies. Also, for the first time certain pharmacies will be offering the publicly funded flu vaccine. This will be available to certain individuals who meet the eligibility criteria for the Public Health seasonal flu program. These individuals include children aged 5-18 years, adults aged 65 and older, and individuals with certain chronic conditions aged 5 years and older.

Even when taking the right precautions some people may still become infected with the influenza 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 the immune system better fight off infection. Finally over-the-counter pain relievers like Tylenol® and Advil® can be used if necessary.

Influenza is a viral infection, capable of causing serious complications in certain individuals. It is important to have a good understanding of the flu's cause, symptoms, prevention and treatment. If you have any questions make sure to ask your physician or pharmacist. Remember your health is our number one priority!

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