

Toolbox Talks

Flu Season & Winter Illness Awareness Part 1



Get Set for Winter Illness Season

In much of the Northern Hemisphere flu season has begun about a month early. With people now spending more time indoors, this is prime time for colds, influenza (flu), & other respiratory illnesses. While contagious viruses are active year-round, fall & winter are when we're all most vulnerable to them. This is due, in large part, to people spending more time indoors with others when the weather gets cold. The Food & Drug Administration (FDA) regulates medicines & vaccines that help fight winter illnesses.

Cold & Flu

Most respiratory bugs come & go within a few days, with no lasting effects. However, some cause serious health problems. Although symptoms of colds & flu can be similar, the two are different. Colds are usually distinguished by a stuffy or runny nose & sneezing. Other symptoms include: coughing, a scratchy throat, & watery eyes.

No vaccine against colds exists, because they can be caused by many types of viruses. Often spread through contact with mucus, colds come on gradually. Flu comes on suddenly, is more serious, & lasts longer than colds. The good news is that yearly vaccination can help protect you from getting the flu. Flu season in the United States generally runs from November to April. Flu symptoms include: fever, headache, chills, dry cough, body aches, fatigue, & general misery. Like colds, flu can cause a stuffy or runny nose, sneezing, & watery eyes. Young children may also experience nausea & vomiting with flu.

How Flu Spreads

Person to Person

People with flu can spread it to others up to about 6 feet away. Most experts think that flu viruses are spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze, or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or could possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it & then touching their own mouth or nose. (To avoid this, people should wash their hands often with soap & water. If soap & water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub. Linens, eating utensils, & dishes belonging to those who are sick should not be shared without washing thoroughly first. Eating utensils can be washed either in a dishwasher or by hand with water & soap & do not need to be cleaned separately.)

Period of Contagiousness

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop & up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Some people, especially young children & people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time. Some persons can be infected with the flu virus but have no symptoms. During this time, those persons may still spread the virus to others.



Prevention Tips

Get Vaccinated Against Flu

According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC): More than 200,000 people in the United States are hospitalized from flu-related complications each year, including 20,000 children younger than age 5. Flu-associated deaths number in the thousands each year. Between 1976 & 2011, the estimated number of flu-related deaths every year ranged from about 3,000 to 49,000. Flu vaccine, available as a shot or a nasal spray, remains the best way to prevent & control influenza. The best time to get a flu vaccination is from October to November, although getting it in December & January is not too late. A new flu shot is needed every year because the predominant flu viruses may change every year.

All people 6 months of age & older should be vaccinated. However, you should talk to your health care professional before getting vaccinated if you have certain allergies, especially to eggs, have an illness, such as pneumonia, have a high fever, or are pregnant.

Flu vaccination for health care workers is urged because unvaccinated workers can be a primary cause of outbreaks in health care settings.

Certain people are more at risk for developing complications from flu; they should be immunized as soon as vaccine is available. These groups include: people 65 & older; residents of nursing homes or other places that house people with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, asthma, & heart disease; adults & children with heart or lung disorders, including asthma; adults & children who have required regular medical follow-up or hospitalization during the preceding year because of chronic metabolic diseases, including diabetes, kidney dysfunction, a weakened immune system, or disorders caused by abnormalities of hemoglobin (a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen); & young people ages 6 months to 18 years receiving long-term aspirin therapy, & who, as a result, might be at risk for developing Reye's syndrome after being infected with influenza.

Note that only one vaccine is needed for the 2012-2013 influenza season. This year's seasonal flu vaccine protects against three strains of influenza, including the H1N1 flu virus.

Also, a vaccine specifically for people 65 years & older is available this year. It's called Flu Zone High-Dose & induces a stronger immune response. It is intended to better protect the elderly against seasonal influenza. This vaccine, which was approved by FDA in early 2012, was developed because the immune system typically becomes weaker with age, leaving people at increased risk of seasonal flu-related complications which may lead to hospitalization & death.

Wash Your Hands Often.

Teach children to do the same. Both colds & flu can be passed through coughing, sneezing, & contaminated surfaces, including the hands. CDC recommends regular washing of your hands with warm, soapy water for about 15 seconds. FDA says that while soap & water are undoubtedly the first choice for hand hygiene, alcohol-based hand rubs may be used if soap & water are not available. However, the agency cautions against using the alcohol-based rubs when hands are visibly dirty. This is because organic material such as dirt or blood can inactivate the alcohol, rendering it unable to kill bacteria.

Try to Limit Exposure to Infected People

Keep infants away from crowds for the first few months of life. This is especially important for premature babies who may have underlying abnormalities, such as lung or heart disease.

Toolbox Talks

Flu Season & Winter Illness Awareness Part 2



Practice healthy habits

Eat a balanced diet. Get enough sleep. Exercise: it can help the immune system better fight off the germs that cause illness. Do your best to keep stress in check. Also, people who use tobacco or who are exposed to secondhand smoke are more prone to respiratory illnesses & more severe complications than nonsmokers.

Already Sick?

Usually, colds & flu simply have to be allowed to run their course. You can try to relieve symptoms without taking medicine. Gargling with salt water may relieve a sore throat, & a cool-mist humidifier may help relieve stuffy noses.

Here are other steps to consider:

- **First, call your doctor.** This will ensure that the best course of treatment can be started early.
- **If you are sick, try not to make others sick too.** Limit your exposure to other people. Also, cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, & throw used tissues into the trash immediately.
- **Stay hydrated & rested.** Fluids can help loosen mucus & make you feel better, especially if you have a fever. Avoid alcohol & caffeinated products as these may dehydrate you.
- **Know your medicine options.** If you choose to use medicine, there are over-the-counter (OTC) options that can help relieve the symptoms of colds & flu. If you want to unclog a stuffy nose, then nasal decongestants may help. Cough suppressants quiet coughs; expectorants loosen mucus so you can cough it up; antihistamines help stop a runny nose & sneezing; & pain relievers can ease fever, headaches, & minor aches. In addition, there are prescription antiviral medications approved by FDA that are indicated for treating the flu. Talk to your health care professional to find out what will work best for you.



Taking OTC Products

- **Be wary of unproven treatments.** It's best to use treatments that have been approved by FDA. Many people believe that products with certain ingredients, vitamin C or Echinacea for example, can treat winter illnesses. Unless FDA has approved a product for treatment of specific symptoms, you cannot assume that the product will treat those symptoms. Tell your health care professionals about any supplements or herbal remedies you use.
- **Read medicine labels carefully & follow directions.** People with certain health conditions, such as high blood pressure, should check with a health care professional or pharmacist before taking a new cough & cold medicine. Some medicines can worsen underlying health problems.

- **Choose appropriate OTC medicines.** Choose OTC medicines specifically for your symptoms. If all you have is a runny nose, only use a medicine that treats a runny nose. This can keep you from unnecessarily doubling up on ingredients, a practice that can prove harmful.

- **Check the medicine's side effects.** Certain medications, such as antihistamines, can cause drowsiness. Medications can interact with food, alcohol, dietary supplements, & each other.

The safest strategy is to make sure your health care professional & pharmacist know about every product you are taking, including nonprescription drugs & any dietary supplements such as vitamins, minerals, & herbs.

- **Check with a doctor before giving medicine to children.** Get medical advice before treating children suffering from cold & flu symptoms. Do not give children medication that is labeled only for adults.

- **Don't give aspirin or aspirin-containing medicines to children & teenagers.**

Children & teenagers suffering from flu-like symptoms, chickenpox, & other viral illnesses shouldn't take aspirin.

Reye's syndrome, a rare & potentially fatal disease found mainly in children, has been associated with using aspirin to treat flu or chickenpox in kids. Reye's syndrome can affect the blood, liver, & brain.

Some medicine labels may refer to aspirin as salicylate or salicylic acid. Be sure to educate teenagers, who may take OTC medicines without their parents' knowledge.

When to See a Doctor

See a health care professional if you aren't getting any better or if your symptoms worsen. Mucus buildup from a viral infection can lead to a bacterial infection. With children, be alert for high fevers & for abnormal behavior such as unusual drowsiness, refusal to eat, crying a lot, holding the ears or stomach, & wheezing.

Signs of trouble for all people can include:

- a cough that disrupts sleep
- a fever that won't go down
- increased shortness of breath
- face pain caused by a sinus infection
- worsening of symptoms, high fever, chest pain, or a difference in the mucus you're producing, all after feeling better for a short time



Cold & flu complications may include bacterial infections (e.g., bronchitis, sinusitis, ear infections, & pneumonia) that could require antibiotics.

Remember: While antibiotics are effective against bacterial infections, they don't help against viral infections such as the cold or flu.