

## Influenza – The “Flu”

The flu is a term that is often (and somewhat incorrectly) used to describe everything from colds, stomach viruses, and other infections. True influenza is typically not dangerous to the average, healthy person, but to the very young, the very old, the immunocompromised, or the pregnant individual, it requires close monitoring of symptoms.

### What Causes the Flu?

Influenza is caused by a virus. Each year there are different strains of viruses identified, and some strains cause worse symptoms than others. If you are exposed to the flu virus through a cough, sneeze, or direct contact with the secretions of an individual with the flu, you may get the flu.

### What are the Symptoms of Influenza?

One of the hallmark features of influenza is sudden onset of fever (greater than 101 degrees), fatigue and body aches. Symptoms often progress to cough, headache, and occasionally nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Symptoms can last up to two weeks, and rarely longer.

### How is Influenza diagnosed?

Your provider may order a chest x-ray if they are concerned that you are at risk for developing a pneumonia, or have a particularly severe case of influenza. Recent research shows that rapid flu testing is not cost effective due to the high rate of false negatives.

### How is the Flu Treated?

*Antibiotics do not help if you have the flu.* There are antiviral medications, such as Tamiflu, that can be prescribed if you have a confirmed diagnosis of the flu; however, the newest research shows little benefit to these medications in comparison to the side effects of the antivirals.

There are several supportive measures that can be taken to help you recover more comfortably if you are diagnosed with influenza.

- *Over the counter pain relievers (Tylenol/acetaminophen, Advil/Motrin/ibuprofen)*
  - Reduce fever
    - Fever is your body's natural defense mechanism when fighting illness. If you are very uncomfortable and cannot tolerate the symptoms of the fever, or the fever is greater than 103 degrees, you can take over the counter medications to reduce the fever.
  - Relieve body aches and pains
    - Do not take Advil/Motrin/ibuprofen if you are pregnant
    - Do not take more than 3000mg (3 grams) of Tylenol/acetaminophen from all sources in 24 hours. Make sure you know if other medications you may be taking contain Tylenol/acetaminophen (such as cough syrups or cold/flu preparations)
- *Cough Medications*

- If your cough is bothersome enough or significantly affecting your sleep, your provider may prescribe a cough medication with ingredients for cough suppression. Some of these medications have codeine in them, which will make you drowsy. You should not drive, operate machinery, or make important decisions while on these medications, and they should be only used as necessary for the shortest amount of time possible.
- Some cough medications can increase blood pressure. If you have hypertension, contact your provider to determine what over the counter medication is appropriate for you
- *Inhaled medications and treatments*
  - Your provider may determine that you need an inhaler or even a nebulizer treatment to increase airflow into your lungs and relieve the shortness of breath and coughing that can accompany the flu.
  - Nebulizer treatments require a machine and can be done at home as well as in the office.
  - Inhalers can be used every 4 hours if needed. Before you use the inhaler, breath out all of your air, make a tight seal around the mouthpiece, and take a deep breath in while depressing the inhaler. Hold the breath in for 5 – 10 seconds if you can, and repeat.
  - Use a humidifier during sleeping hours. A warm mist humidifier provides moisture to the air which can ease the discomfort in the nasal passages and airways. You may add Vicks vaporizer solution or similar product to provide soothing relief.
  - Vicks VapoRub or similar product is used topically on the chest to provide soothing relief from congestion.
- **COVER YOUR COUGH AND SNEEZE!**
  - Protect those around you from catching your illness – avoid travel, and stay away from crowded or public places. Use a tissue to cough or sneeze into or use the inside crook of your elbow to cover your cough or sneeze (not your hand!).
  - If you must travel, take sealable plastic baggies with you to place your dirty tissues in to avoid the spread of your illness to those who may be cleaning up after you.
- **WASH YOUR HANDS!**
  - Clean hands help prevent the spread of disease.
  - Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, or if soap and water aren't available, use an alcohol based hand sanitizer
  - Wash your hands after you use the restroom, after you cough or sneeze, before and after food preparation/meals, and more frequently if you are in public places.
- *Prevent the Spread of the Flu – Stay Home*
  - If you have the flu, stay home until you are fever free for 24 hours
  - Avoid crowded places, and stay away from pregnant women, small children, the elderly, and immunocompromised individuals who are most at risk for complications from influenza.

### **Protect Yourself and Others – Get Vaccinated**

The flu vaccine is different every year, targeting specific identified strains that are most likely to cause outbreaks of influenza in that year. Theoretically, if you get the flu vaccine every year, by the time you are in your later years of life you have effectively inoculated yourself against all previous strains of the flu, which constantly changes. This is one of the reasons it is so important to get a flu shot every year.

The CDC recommends yearly flu vaccine for every individual ages 6 months or older, including pregnant women in any trimester. Flu vaccines are no longer incubated in eggs, so even if you have an egg allergy, you can now get your flu shot! You can still get your flu shot if you have a cold or another mild illness. If you have a fever, it's best to wait until your fever is gone for 24 hours before you get your vaccination. If you have a significant health problem, such as some Autoimmune diseases and some cancers, or a history of Guillian – Barre Syndrome, talk with your provider before getting your flu shot.