

INFLUENZA

Influenza has been a very hot topic lately, with concerns about avian (bird) flu, swine flu (now called H1N1) and all the concerns that abound anytime a new illness hits the news. Influenza in general is a very common illness that infects hundreds of thousands of people each year. Most of those infected do well with over-the-counter treatments and rest; however, a significant percentage of those infected will require support in the hospital, and about 30,000 people die from seasonal influenza each year.

In many ways the new H1N1 influenza acts a lot like the seasonal flu, but there are a few variations. H1N1 is a new strain, meaning the majority of people have never been exposed to it or anything similar. Because of this, it is likely to spread more rapidly than seasonal influenza. This means that more people are probably going to be infected. Currently the percentage of people that die from H1N1 is very similar to that of seasonal influenza, but because of the number of people that it is expected to infect, the number of deaths could be much higher as well. This virus also tends to be more severe in young individuals. H1N1 first appeared in spring of 2009, and continued to circulate in the community even through the summer, something regular influenza doesn't usually do. Regular influenza peaks in the winter and early spring each year.

Regardless of the strain of influenza, the symptoms of the illness are very similar. People with influenza generally have high fevers (102+), chills, cough, body aches and tiredness. Runny nose, sore throat and dizziness are also common. Occasionally a little upset stomach or nausea also occurs. Symptoms generally last several days to a week then gradually subside over the next 1-2 weeks.

Influenza is commonly confused with both the common cold and with gastroenteritis ("the stomach flu"). The common cold tends to be much less severe, and patients typically have more runny nose, congestion and sneezing, with less fever and body aches. Patients with gastroenteritis have the vomiting and diarrhea that people commonly associate with "the flu".

Influenza is easily spread in two primary ways. The first is through exposure to little water droplets that are showered into the air every time somebody sneezes, coughs or even talks. Influenza virus (and many other viruses) travels on these little droplets until either they fall to the ground or are inhaled by you. The other primary route of exposure is through contact with these fluids on other surfaces (shopping cart handles, door knobs, toys, etc.). It is common for somebody to cough into their hand, push the shopping cart, and then you come along, push the cart, and if you don't wash your hands before touching your face or food, you become infected with the virus. Once infected, it usually is about 1-3 days before you will start to show symptoms; however, you can begin to spread the virus yourself about 1 day before you even start to feel sick.

There are also two main ways to protect yourself from influenza. One is through immunization. Through immunization, your body is able to practice fighting the virus before you become exposed to the real thing.

Then, when you are exposed to the real virus, your body is ready for it, and your immune system can overcome the virus before it has a chance to make you sick. Keep in mind that the flu shot is for *influenza*, and won't protect you against the common cold or gastroenteritis. You should receive a flu shot yearly, because each year the strain of influenza virus circulating in the community changes a little, so prior immunization doesn't prepare your body well for what may be coming the following year. Flu shots are typically recommended for all people 6 months and older. For healthy individuals ages 2-49 years, there is also a nasal spray form of the vaccine that is available for those who would rather not have the shot.

The other way to protect yourself is to avoid contact with the contaminated respiratory droplets. Hand washing is the best way to accomplish this. You can either use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. You should wash your hands frequently, especially after using the restroom, after coughing or blowing your nose, before eating, or anytime you may have touched a potentially contaminated surface (shopping cart, public toys, etc). Since the virus is spread from person to person through the air over a distance of 3 to 6 feet, avoiding crowded areas can also help. This is especially important for young infants and people with underlying medical problems that may make influenza worse (e.g. asthma).

If you suspect you have influenza, the majority of care is supportive, meaning we treat the symptoms to help you feel better. This is usually accomplished with fever-reducing medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol). Adults and children over 4 years old can also try the over-the-counter treatments such as cough medicines or cough and cold medications. Keep in mind, however, coughing helps eliminate mucous in the chest and that if the cough is suppressed too much the mucous may build up, complicating the illness. If your child is younger than 4 you should talk with your physician before trying over-the-counter medications other than plain fever-reducers. **Never give aspirin to children with influenza or influenza-like illness.** Since this is a viral illness, **antibiotics do not help you get better faster.**

Other treatments that tend to help and are safe at any age include: running a humidifier, using saline nasal sprays or washes, and having young children and infants sleep with their head slightly elevated. It is also important to drink plenty of fluids in order to stay hydrated. Most people don't feel like eating solid foods early in the illness, but as long as they are drinking enough to stay hydrated, they will do OK.

If the illness is severe, or if you or your child is at high risk for complications (younger than 2 years old, over 65 years old, pregnant, or with chronic conditions like asthma, cystic fibrosis, diabetes or cancer) you should see your physician. These people may benefit from antiviral treatment. Antiviral medications are not a cure for influenza; they merely shorten the course by a couple of days, and in some cases may also lessen the severity of the illness. Certain complications like ear infections or pneumonia may require treatment with an antibiotic.

If your child is having difficulty breathing, she should be seen immediately. The following are signs that your child is having trouble breathing and should be seen:

- Any blueness in the lips or nail beds means she needs to be seen immediately.
- Persistently fast breathing (much faster than normal).

- Widening her nostrils with each breath.
- Retractions – will look like she is trying to pull her stomach up into her chest or that her ribs are trying to pop out with each breath.
- Poor feeding (refusing to nurse or bottle feed in infants).
- Fever 100.4 or above in any baby less than 3 months old or lasting more than 3-4 days in an older baby/child.

When in doubt, it is always safest to have your child seen by her physician.

The information contained on Dr. Tyson Horkley's website, including all of its linked pages, is provided for your general information only. It is not intended to replace medical advice offered by health care providers. If you have or suspect you have a medical problem, you should consult a healthcare provider.