

the FLU SEASON IS COMING

By Brian C. Hancey, MD

During flu season several years ago, an otherwise healthy woman described to me the misery of her past few days. She complained of a hacking cough, body aches and headaches, nasal congestion, and sneezing. She tried to rest but was awakened by the chills and sweats of her 102° fever. She had missed a couple days of work and was generally just feeling horrible. Over-the-counter medications seemed to help, but her symptoms just returned after a period of hours. I listened, carefully examined her, and then told her that I was fairly certain she had contracted the influenza virus from which so many others in our community were suffering. She stared at me (actually, it was more of a scowl) for a few seconds. She then proclaimed, “Doctor, you don’t understand. I don’t have the flu. I’m DYING.” We discussed the influenza virus in more detail, and I gave her some options to confirm her diagnosis and help with her symptoms.

Once flu shots arrive, health officials recommend that almost everyone be vaccinated, especially those who are at risk for developing flu-related complications or who live with someone who is at risk for developing such complications. Those at high risk for complications include people 65 years or older, people with chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), pregnant women, and young children. It’s best to have a flu shot as soon as they become available.

Many people will follow the advice to get a flu shot. Then sometime between November and February, our community will likely have an outbreak of influenza. Emergency rooms, InstaCares, and Intermountain Medical Group clinics will be filled with patients hoping to receive relief from their symptoms. These are generally people who neglected the advice to get a flu shot.

Up to 20 percent of the population is infected with the flu each year. In the United States, 200,000 people will be hospitalized due to influenza-related complications (such as pneumonia). And between 30,000 and 50,000 people will die each year from flu-related complications.

Mild symptoms can be managed at home with rest, plenty of clear fluids, and over-the-counter (OTC) medications. If you are at high risk for flu-related complications or if you have severe symptoms (particularly trouble with breathing), you should consult your healthcare provider. Some people might benefit from anti-viral medication that can decrease the severity and duration of the symptoms. However, this prescription medication must be started within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

How to Care for Influenza

1. Stay at home and rest until you have no fever for at least 24 hours.
2. Avoid close contact with well people in your house so you don’t make them sick.
3. Drink plenty of water and other clear liquids to prevent fluid loss (dehydration).
4. If needed, treat symptoms such as fever and cough with medicines you can buy at the drugstore.
5. If you become severely sick, are pregnant, or have a medical condition that puts you at higher risk of flu complications, call your doctor. You might need anti-viral medicine to treat the flu.

For additional information about the flu, visit cdc.gov/flu. To find a doctor nearby or a clinic with available flu vaccines, please visit the index at the back of this publication or intermountainmedicalgroup.org.

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How to Avoid the Flu

1. Get the yearly influenza (flu) vaccine.
2. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, or use hand sanitizer.
3. Avoid contact with those who have flu-like symptoms.
4. Cover coughs and sneezes.

Flu Vaccine Facts

1. The flu vaccine is usually available in your community in the early fall.
2. The flu vaccine is recommended for almost everyone over six months of age.
3. Protection against influenza will begin two weeks after the time you receive your vaccine.
4. The flu vaccine can protect you the entire winter season and beyond.
5. Nasal spray is available for those between two and 49 years.
6. Receiving a flu shot can reduce the risk of death from influenza-related complications by 80 percent.
7. Flu vaccines have been closely monitored for safety for more than 50 years.