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The Scary Truth About Influenza

The Flu Kills More Than 36,000 People Each Year -- Here's How to Protect Yourself



A flu vaccination is one of the most reliable ways to protect yourself from illness during flu season. (AP Photo)

By **SALLY H. HOUSTON, M.D.**



March 28, 2007 — Flu has been one of the most devastating infections in human history. In 1918 and 1919, the flu killed 50 million people worldwide in just a few months.

Fortunately, flu seasons this dangerous are rare. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 5 to 20 percent of Americans get the flu each year. That is 15 to 60 million people in the United States alone.

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Approximately 200,000 are hospitalized because of flu complications, and 36,000 die. Many of these deaths could be prevented if people got their flu vaccine in the fall each year.

There are hundreds of possible strains of flu virus, and getting the flu once does not protect you from getting it again.

Each year scientists determine which strains of flu are the most likely for the next flu season. Then they make a vaccine to protect against those strains.

Even if you get infected with a different strain, the flu vaccine will help your body fight off the infection more quickly, and you will not get as sick.

What Is Flu?

The flu is caused by the influenza virus, a potentially life-threatening respiratory tract infection that can be prevented by getting vaccinated and avoiding exposure. Preventing the spread of influenza is everyone's responsibility.

Flu symptoms include sudden onset of high fever, dry cough, sore throat, stuffy nose and severe muscle pains in the legs and low back. People with the flu usually do not experience a runny nose, vomiting or diarrhea.

Most people with flu will feel terrible for five to seven days and then recover completely. However, the very young, elderly or those with chronic illnesses are at greater risk of developing complications that may lead to hospitalization or even death. These patients develop life-threatening complications such as pneumonia, respiratory failure or heart failure.

What Do I Do If I Get the Flu?

The most important thing any flu victim can do is to stay at home. This will help prevent spread of flu to others.

A quick call to your doctor is also important because there are medicines that will shorten the course and decrease the severity of flu symptoms, but they must be started within 48 hours of the first symptoms.

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(Page 2 of 3)



Rest, drink plenty of fluids and take acetaminophen, ibuprofen or aspirin to help with the fever and muscle aches. But *never* give aspirin to children with the flu because serious and deadly complications can develop.

Tylenol is a very safe medication for treating fever and pain, but high doses or even normal doses taken with alcohol can cause liver failure. Check over-the-counter medication labels to be sure that you do not take more than 4000 mg of acetaminophen in 24 hours. Ibuprofen should be taken with plenty of liquids and some food to prevent stomach upset.

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How Can I Prevent Flu?

Vaccination is safe and effective. There are two kinds of vaccine: an injection and a new nasal vaccine.

The injection is made with killed flu virus and is safe for people 6 months old and older. The nasal vaccine is administered directly into the nose and is for healthy people between the ages of 5 and 49 years.

You cannot get flu from the injected vaccine. There is a small risk that people with weakened immune systems could become sick from the nasal vaccine, which is made with a weakened form of the flu virus.

Some people still get flu after vaccination, but they are much less likely to become seriously ill than those who have not been vaccinated.

There may not be adequate supplies of flu vaccine to vaccinate everyone against flu every year. In that case, vaccine manufacturers and public health authorities will work together to assure those at greatest risk receive vaccines first.

Priorities for flu vaccination include individuals at high risk for complications and their caregivers. This includes children 6 months to 5 years old, pregnant women, those over 50 years old, people who live in nursing homes and those with chronic illnesses.

Complications associated with flu vaccine are very rare and include pain and swelling at the injection site, fever and aches (more common in children), and allergic reactions to components of the vaccine.

Medicines used to treat flu can also be used to prevent flu, but these work best when used in addition to the vaccine. Otherwise, they must be taken for the whole flu season, which spans fall and winter.

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(Page 3 of 3)



Some people cannot take vaccine and may need to take these medications to prevent flu. Check with your doctor if you have questions about flu prevention.

Keeping sick people at home, washing hands frequently, covering nose and mouth with tissue when coughing or sneezing will prevent flu, as well as ward off other germs that cause colds, vomiting or diarrhea.

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