

Fighting the Flu

- ✖ This season get the facts on how to keep your family healthy.

In the past few years there has been much attention focused on the potential for a bird flu or swine flu pandemic that it's easy to lose sight of the perils of the regular flu season. The flu is more common than many people realize. In the United States, the flu season may begin as early as October and last until May, peaking between December and March.

The overall impact varies from year to year, but the CDC reports that 5 percent to 20 percent of the population gets the flu every year with more than 200,000 hospitalized for flu complications. Even more alarming is that approximately 36,000 people die each year from the flu (see).

With numbers like these, it's important to learn about this disease. The Bible tells us that "the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom shields and preserves the life of him who has it" (Eccl. 7:12, The Amplified Bible). Therefore, the first step is to seek knowledge.

WHY WE GET SICK

The flu is a contagious respiratory disease that affects the nose, throat, bronchial tubes and lungs. It is caused by three types (strains) of influenza viruses: A, B and C. Type A is responsible for the deadly influenza pandemics that occur. Type B is usually associated with local flu outbreaks. Type C is less common, characterized by mild symptoms and generally not responsible for seasonal epidemics.

Types A and B constantly change, leading to the emergence of new strains. They are the cause of epidemics every winter, necessitating the development of new flu vaccines each year.

Flu viruses are spread through the air when an infected person

releases respiratory droplets by coughing, sneezing or talking. The disease is contracted by inhaling these droplets or by coming in contact with contaminated objects such as telephones, doorknobs and computers. The germs are then transferred from the hands to the mouth, nose or eyes. After entering the body, the germs multiply and infect the respiratory tract.

The first step in maintaining health is to know the truth. Now it's time to learn more about influenza and what can be done to prevent it.

SYMPTOMS AND TREATMENTS

Initially, it's easy to confuse symptoms of the flu with the common cold. However, although a cold usually takes some time to develop, the flu comes on suddenly.

In addition to cold-like symptoms, people suffering from the flu may also experience:

- High fever (above 101°F in adults; higher in children)
- Headaches
- Chills and sweating
- Muscle aches and pains
- Fatigue and weakness
- Nausea and vomiting (more common among children).

Although the flu causes misery, it is usually not a serious condition for young, healthy people and subsides with no long-lasting effects. However, serious complications can occur in high-risk groups when people become infected with other germs while suffering from the flu.

Secondary bacterial illnesses such as ear and sinus infections, bronchitis and pneumonia may become life threatening. People with chronic medical problems such as heart conditions, asthma and diabetes may also see a worsening of their condition.

Healthy people usually need nothing more than rest and plenty of fluids to treat the flu. In some cases doctors prescribe antiviral medications that deactivate the virus and prevent it from spreading further. These prescriptions are most effective when taken within the first couple of days of the infection.

Antiviral medications can produce side effects such as nausea, vomiting, appetite loss and difficult breathing. They can also lead to the development of drug-resistant viruses. It is important to speak to a doctor about possible side effects before taking antiviral medications.

Now that the cause, symptoms and dangers of influenza have been discussed, it's time to learn how it can be prevented.

PREVENTING THE FLU

These five steps can help you stay healthy during flu season:

1. Get Vaccinated. According to the CDC, the single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each year. The vaccine works by causing your body to develop antibodies that provide protection from influenza viruses.

There are two types of influenza vaccines: 1) the shot, which is an injection of killed viruses, and 2) nasal spray, which contains weakened live viruses. Each contains three types of influenza viruses: two type A strains and one type B strain.

The vaccine changes each year depending on which viral strains are in circulation. Therefore, it is important to get vaccinated every year because the vaccine used the previous year may not provide protection against subsequent circulating strains.

Anyone can be vaccinated at a doctor's office, health department and many pharmacies. It is recommended that high-risk groups get vaccinated each year. The best time to get vaccinated is October or November.

2. Wash your hands often. Thorough and frequent hand washing is the best way to prevent many common infectious diseases, including the flu. Hand washing removes germs that may have been transferred to the skin from contaminated objects.

The correct way to wash your hands is to use soap and water and scrub them vigorously for at least 15 seconds. Alcohol-based hand gels are also effective against germs.

3. Avoid contact with people who are sick. If you have been around anyone who is ill, do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth. In case you get sick, avoid close contact with people, and cover your nose and mouth with tissue when sneezing or coughing to prevent spreading the virus.

4. Avoid crowds during the flu season. Flu viruses are very contagious and spread easily in public places such as schools, childcare centers and large office buildings. Reduce the risk of catching the flu by avoiding crowds whenever possible during the peak flu season. If you can, stay home when you are sick to avoid spreading your illness to others.

5. Take care of the temple. Our bodies are amazing creations designed by God with an amazing system for protecting us—our immune system. As with anything that requires preventive maintenance, you must take care of your body if you want that system to work well.

GOOD HEALTH HABITS

Poor diet and lack of rest will make your body more vulnerable to infections. Try to incorporate fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains into your diet. Some nutritionists also recommend eating small amounts of lean protein.

Getting plenty of rest is a necessity. At least seven to eight hours every night works well for most adults. Children may require even more sleep. It is best to speak with your physician if you are unsure about your diet and rest requirements.

Most experts agree that regular exercise is good for the immune system. Cardiovascular exercises such as walking, jogging, bicycling and aerobics help maintain overall health. If you have a medical condition that prevents certain types of physical activity, ask your physician about the types of exercises that will work best for you. It will help you maintain health, which in turn may result in less severe symptoms and a faster recovery time.

Each year hundreds of thousands of people in the United States contract influenza. The good news there is much that can be done to thwart the virus. Although vaccination is recommended as the best way to avoid the flu, practicing the healthy habits described above will reduce your risk of infection.

Leslie Ann Dauphin, Ph.D., *is the author of The Germ Handbook (Siloam), from which this article was adapted. Dauphin is a microbiologist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This article is not written on behalf of the CDC.*