

## The Flu is Coming! Prevent it Now!

Flu season is here once again and with it, all the ongoing muscle aches, headaches, and fever. Flu season usually begins in November and lasts through March, and some cases are already being reported.

Influenza is the "flu virus" and unlike simple "cold" viruses, influenza is a major health problem, not just a nuisance. It can keep our children home from school and make us lose time from work. The Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 10-20 percent of Americans will come down with the flu, more than 100,000 will be hospitalized, and 36,000 people may die from the flu. More than 80% of those deaths are in persons over age 65, making it the 6th leading cause of death in that age group.

Influenza A and B are the most important strains of the virus. The flu virus goes throughout multiple variations and mutations every year. This requires that the flu vaccine be newly formulated each year based on the strains of flu that arose the previous year. Influenza A can also be found in animals. This explains epidemics caused, for example, by animal viruses such as swine flu (from pigs) and avian flu (from birds). A special article on the avian flu, we have been hearing so much about, is available.

It is not surprising that the flu can mimic a cold with sore throats and dry cough, because the virus usually infects and stays in the nose, throat, and lungs. Potent chemicals released from injured cells in the nose, throat, and lung called chemokines (Chee-mo-kines) and not the virus, are responsible for symptoms commonly found like headache, muscle aches and fever.

Flu symptoms usually come on quickly and last about a week. People can sometimes pinpoint the exact time they began to feel bad. The muscle aches and pains, headache and fever may be very severe, but stomach upset, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea is almost never present. Complications, like pneumonia, can occur, are more common in persons over 65, and should be diagnosed early and treated.

So how can we prevent the flu? Very simply, Get the flu vaccine, now. Flu vaccine is now being given in late fall because it takes 2-3 weeks for the vaccine to become protective. Unfortunately, it is estimated that only 30% of people get the flu vaccine regularly each year. Everyone who is able, both children and adults, should get the vaccine. The only exceptions are people with an egg allergy, and people who have a fever. Contrary to popular belief, the flu vaccine rarely produces flu-like symptoms and in those rare cases where it does, the symptoms are much more mild than those of the actual flu. In addition, people with known egg allergy can be tested to the vaccine. If the tests are negative, the vaccine can be safely given. Recently, the FDA approved a live viral nasal spray vaccine called FluMist. It is approved for patients aged 5-49, but should not be given to patients with heart and lung conditions, diabetes, immunodeficiency, pregnant women, or patients with egg allergies.

Unfortunately, even if you do get the vaccine, there is still a chance of getting the flu. Should you get the flu there are some medications available to make symptoms less severe and to help you get well faster. The first anti-flu drugs, Amantadine and Rimantadine, were only effective against Influenza A, and sometimes caused unwanted side effects. Some viral strains are now resistant to these drugs as well.

In 1999, the FDA also approved Relenza (Zanamivir) and Tamiflu (Oseltamivir) to test and/or prevent influenza. Both drugs work to prevent an enzyme called neuraminidase, which the virus needs to multiply and are effective against both influenza A & B. Relenza is a powder inhaled twice a day by mouth for five days through a device that comes by prescription. The good news is the drug stays in the lungs where the flu virus attaches and multiplies. This drug is approved only for treating infected patients 7 years and older who have not had symptoms for more than 2 days.

Tamiflu is approved for treating infection in children 1 year and older without symptoms for more than 2 days, and preventing the flu in patients 13 years and older. Tamiflu is available in a liquid or pill, taken twice daily for 5 days. Relenza & Tamiflu are also not recommended for pregnant women or patients allergic to these drugs. Both drugs can cause some coughing or wheezing in asthmatics or persons with emphysema, so it is recommended that these people have Proventil HFA or Albuterol inhaler around just in case, but that appears to be the only significant side effect.

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410-553-8004

301-860-1200

info@allergyhealthcare.com