

# The Rampant Misbranding Of The Flu



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — November 28, 2017



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How often do you hear a friend or colleague even stranger say, “I was sick with the flu?” It’s a refrain likely to occur each winter. Are they lying? No. Mistaken is more accurate.

Many believe certain illnesses are the flu that actually are not. For instance, there are well over a hundred different rhinoviruses that cause the common cold. That’s why you can get a few colds per season. Some are mild, others more severe. Each distinctly manifests in the respective host. If our resistance is down or we have other conditions or take certain medications, then we can be more at risk of contracting infectious diseases and experiencing them with greater severity.

This can be why one of us has a minor snuffle and another of us is in bed. And yet another acquires nothing. This should not give a false sense of security to those otherwise healthy as they are not immune to contracting the flu or to getting it to a significant degree.

The flu is caused by an influenza virus. It is affirmed by specific testing. If you were not specifically tested for it and deemed positive, then it is possible you did not have it.

Why is this distinction so important? An upper or lower respiratory infection by any name causes unpleasant symptoms after all and can be contagious. From a medical professional standpoint, knowing precisely what we are dealing with, whenever possible, is essential to preventing its spread and, hopefully, curtailing its clinical course. While also proactively avoiding complications.

Additionally, there is a lot of confusion and misinformation routinely disseminated about the flu vaccine supposedly causing the flu. Because we are in the middle of cold and flu season, it is not uncommon to get the vaccine while incubating another infection whose symptoms have yet to appear. The inactivated, injectable flu shot might have been given when another illness is already brewing, but it won’t cause you to contract the flu. It is possible to have some redness or soreness

at the injection site---as with any other shot. Fever for a short, limited duration is not uncommon after a shot, but is typically viewed by the medical community as proof the vaccine is doing its job to stimulate an immune response (thereby achieving the intended goal of future protection) as opposed to being considered a real side effect.

The flu tends to cause a more abrupt onset of high fever with chills and sweats, bone pain, severe muscle or joint aches, headache, profound fatigue, cough and worsening respiratory symptoms. Unlike your average cold, it usually involves less thick, nasal congestion. Common complications include dehydration or secondary pneumonia, among others. It can be fatal and is especially dangerous for those with co-morbidities like underlying heart or lung disease as well as the extremes of ages. Because the virus itself mutates each year, there have been strains that more adversely impacted specific populations.

These are general descriptions. Most often they apply to a different degree. But, as with all disease states, there is a dynamic nature to them and depending on the individual afflicted the presentation can be highly variable. Where one person like a young child could have vomiting or persistent irritability as a main initial issue, another might have a dry cough and runny nose as the first symptoms.

Seeking early care and guidance from your or your child's doctor if there is a concern for the flu is in your best interest. Especially if you or your loved one is in an at risk or compromised population. Talking about prevention (e.g. frequent hand washing, flu shot) with the physician who knows your medical history and has examined you is the best way to empower yourself and, hopefully, avoid such problems in the first place.

So, next time you hear "I had sinus" don't assume sinusitis was the correct diagnosis or that you will catch sinusitis. Everyone who catches a cold or the flu does not necessarily evolve to a sinus infection. Where one might, another will not and yet another might get nothing. To remain healthy amidst all the bugs that abound this time of year, don't share food or drink with other people in general and wash your hands frequently. Try to balance enjoying life with some common sense measures like not getting in the path of someone coughing or who is actively sick. If doing so is essential to caring for a loved one, then taking proper precautions is ideal and can serve you very well.

As always, the healthier we are in our lives (consistently) is the most optimal way to garner a more formidable constitution. If we can most of the time eat a well-balanced diet, get good sleep, remain socially connected, exercise routinely and maintain a reduced stress level, then we are on a more preferable course to enhance our well-being.

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