The Flu Is Here

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — October 10, 2018

The flu has arrived in the U.S. for the 2018-2019 season. Kentucky just reported its first flu-related death [2]. With last year’s overall hospitalization rates [3], among all ages, the highest recorded in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) surveillance system, it is important to clarify confusion over the topic.

Cold and Flu Season

Cold and flu season typically begins around now and can continue until as late as May. Last year, the flu started to increase in activity in November with greatest intensity in January and February continuing at that level through the end of March. Both cold and flu are infectious diseases, meaning with sufficient exposure they can be passed from one person to the next, albeit when in line with an infected person’s sneeze or cough, for example. The former is caused by a number of different viruses which is why you can get more than one cold per winter, as you recover from one you can catch another strain. They are also milder in symptoms than the flu.

The flu is caused by influenza virus. This virus mutates year to year which is why a new vaccine for the flu is manufactured annually. The most virulent strains determined for that season are used to develop the vaccine so as to protect people from acquiring the bug at all.

Prevention is best

Because treating flu mainly involves supportive care not cure of the disease, the best way to avoid the illness and its potential complications, which in many cases can be life-threatening and fatal, is to prevent infection in the first place. Hand-washing is crucial during this time of year - if you think of doing it, then do it (the repetitive action can only help you). Keep your hands out of your mouth or eyes especially after navigating the world (e.g. touching surfaces like elevator buttons, door
Children are a big source of germs, they are like human petri dishes especially the younger set. They find the world around them fascinating so they suck on anything they grab, drool even more when teething and spread lots of bugs in the process. But, they are super cute, so we tend to give them a pass.

Not being around those with active symptoms, whenever possible, is also a great common sense measure that can protect you. Often, considering the dynamic nature of homes and the world around us, this isn’t always possible which is why arming yourself with a flu shot is a highly sensible, effective step. The flu vaccine, even in years where it may not be the most perfect match in terms of coverage for what strains abound in your region, can best help you prevent contracting the flu or, at the very least, will make it a less severe course. The earlier you can get the vaccine during the season, the better you will be protected from the flu.

**Anyone can get the flu**

Anyone can get the flu which is why public health organizations push for everyone to get vaccinated (those who are eligible for vaccine, over age 6 months). It is also the most ideal method we have to protect the most vulnerable in your home and in society. The elderly, very young, those with underlying heart and lung disease and the most immunocompromised (e.g. cancer patients on chemotherapy) among us are at high risk of having a tragic outcome from the flu. So, when you get the vaccine you protect yourself and those around you. It is also a misperception that someone otherwise healthy doesn’t get a bad result, and this is, unfortunately, not always the case.

Many people tend to think what they had was the flu, and unless it was specifically tested for that is often not the case. To understand the many misperceptions of the flu and how it is misbranded, review [here](https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/10/10/flu-here-13492) [4].

**In conclusion**

Talk to your doctor about the best ways to prevent acquiring the flu and what to do should you or a loved one develop symptoms. Your doctor will know your entire medical history and clinical status and can take proactive steps to keep you safe. The CDC tracks the flu each season, so you can follow what areas are most impacted [here](https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/fluactivity.htm) [5] and how it is traversing the U.S. But, this should not provide a false sense of security, given how air travel and modern conveniences assist in the gathering of people in crowded areas thereby facilitating the ease of spread.

There is no reason you can’t be enjoying the change of season and taking proper precautions to avoid unnecessary infections at the same time. And, if complete avoidance is improbable, then early medical treatment and guidance by a healthcare professional is a great plan.

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