

Seasonal Influenza for the Elderly

By Deb Hintz

I went to a friend's home for a visit a few weeks ago and about 3 days later I came down with the flu. I felt terrible. I woke up with a headache, body aches, coughing with a sore throat. I was sure I had the flu but wondered where I had got this bug. After some thought, I remembered my friend was coughing and complaining about a sore throat. At that time, I didn't think too much about her symptoms. Later it dawned on me that we are season and I had not yet gotten the flu shot. I was angry with myself for not taking the necessary precautions in time.



Weaker immune defenses put the elderly at serious risk from the flu virus.

The flu can appear with no warning. One moment you are feeling well and – bam – the next you are not. In the United States, fall and winter is the typical time for getting the flu. The exact timing and duration of the flu seasons varies. Flu outbreaks often begin in October and can last as late as May, however most of the time flu activity peaks between December and February.

Unfortunately, those who are 65 years or older are at greater risk of serious complications from the flu compared to younger people. This is because human immune defenses become weaker with age and makes it harder for the elderly population to fight disease.

What is the flu?

Influenza (flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. The illness affects a person's nose, throat and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness and at times can lead to death. Some people such as the elderly, younger children and

people with certain health conditions are at higher risks for serious complications. The flu can make existing health conditions worse. People who suffer from diabetes, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma are more at risk for serious complications and can result in hospitalization and even death. Some of the complications can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infection, sinuses infection, dehydration and worsening of their chronic medical condition.

How does the flu spread?

According to the CDC (Center of Disease Control), the flu virus is spread by droplets made when people with the flu cough, sneeze or even speak. These droplets can land in the mouth or nose of people who are nearby. A person may also get the flu by touching a surface or object that has the viruses on it, then touches their own mouth, eyes or their nose.

What is the period of contagiousness?

The viruses may be passed on to another during several days when the carrier is contagious. Beginning a day before actual symptoms develop, and running up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. During that time, the person with the flu can pass it on to others.

What are some of the symptoms of the flu?

Individuals who have the flu often feel some or all of the following signs and symptoms: fever or feeling feverish/chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, feeling fatigue, and some people may have vomiting and diarrhea although this symptom is more common in children than adults. It is important to know that not everyone with the flu will have a fever.

Protect yourself and others from getting the flu?

- ✓ Get vaccinated - The number one thing a person can do to protect themselves and others is to get a yearly flu shot. A flu vaccine protects against the flu viruses that has been identified by researchers to be the most common during the upcoming flu season.
- ✓ Practice good health habits - The second thing to do to protect yourself is to practice standard precautions. Cover your cough or sneeze with a Kleenex or use the bend of your elbow or upper arm. Never cough into your hands. Avoid close contact with others-stay at home if you are sick. Wash your hands with soap and water often. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Clean and

disinfect surfaces or objects in your home. Simple precautions can make a difference when trying to prevent getting sick with the flu.

- ✓ See your doctor - The third thing you can do to protect yourself is seek medical advice quickly if you develop the flu symptoms. The professionals can evaluate whether you need treatment and can prevent the symptoms from becoming a serious health threat.

Becoming sick after getting a flu shot

People often ask “Can I get the flu after I get a flu shot”? The answer is yes - it is possible for people to get the flu even if they received the flu shot for the following reasons:

- ✓ Prior exposure - You may have been exposed to the flu before getting the shot or during the period it takes the body to get protection from the flu shot. It takes about 2 weeks after getting the flu shot for antibodies to develop in the body.
- ✓ Different strain of flu - You may have been exposed to a flu virus that is not included in this season’s flu vaccine.
- ✓ Diminished immunity - Some older people and individuals who have certain chronic illnesses may develop less immunity after receiving the vaccine.

The flu vaccine is not a perfect tool but it is the best way to protect against the flu infection.

Vaccinate every year

It is important to know that the flu vaccine declines over time and that is why people need to get vaccinated every year. The effectiveness of the vaccine is influenced by the age and the general health of the person who was vaccinated as well as the antigens used in the medicine. Older people or those who have a weakened immune system may not generate the same amount of antibodies after receiving the vaccine and the antibody levels may drop more quickly compared to young healthy people.

Is there treatment for the flu?

The answer is yes-the drugs are called “antiviral” drugs. These antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. These medications can also prevent serious flu-related complications like pneumonia.

During flu season it is best to be proactive and follow the guidelines set by the CDC for the flu. Always check with your provider to be evaluated for the best treatment and to answers any questions you may have regarding the flu. For more information about the flu visit the following websites: www.noca.org/flu, www.cdc.gov/flu or www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/65over.



HomeAid Health Care
Helping Hands at Home

Deb Hintz is Assistant to the Director for HomeAid Health Care. HomeAid provides services for the elderly who wish to remain safe and independent at home. HomeAid is sister company to Prairie Home Assisted Living which has served the physical, spiritual, mental and health needs of their residents since 1999. Together the two companies provide comprehensive care for the elderly in the Fox Valley area of Wisconsin.