You versus the flu!

Human influenza, or the flu, is a viral respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus.

Influenza typically starts with:
• Headache
• Chills
• Burning sensation in your chest
• Cough

Followed rapidly by:
• Fever
• Loss of appetite
• Muscle aches, especially in your back and legs
• Fatigue
• Runny nose – often including yellow, green or brown discharge
• Sneezing
• Watery eyes
• Throat irritation

Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may also occur, especially in children.

Most people will recover from influenza within a week or 10 days; but some – including those over 65 and adults and children with chronic conditions, such as diabetes and cancer – are at greater risk of more severe complications, such as pneumonia.

Flu season almost always strikes between November and April, affecting 10 to 25 percent of Canadians each year. While the majority will recover, the flu results in an average of 20,000 hospitalizations and 4,000 deaths in Canada each year.

Keep it to yourself!

Influenza is contagious, which means it can spread easily from person to person. Viruses that cause influenza spread from person to person mainly by droplets of respiratory fluids that are sent through the air when someone infected with the virus coughs or sneezes. Other people inhale the airborne virus and can become infected.

The flu can also spread when someone touches a surface (i.e. doorknobs, countertops, telephones, bank machines, handrails, poles on buses, etc.) that has the virus on it; and then touches his or her nose, mouth or eyes.

The flu takes one to four days to incubate in humans, but infected people become contagious before symptoms appear, often the day after the virus enters the body. Adults remain contagious for about six days; and children can remain contagious for up to 10 days.

Get well soon!

If you do contract the flu, you can help speed along your recovery by:

• Avoiding exertion – set aside work, your fitness routine and any stress that comes along while you’re recovering; you can get back to your daily activities one to two days after your temperature returns to normal;

• Drinking plenty of fluids – six to eight glasses a day. Try drinking hot fluids to help with nasal and chest congestion;

• Humidifying the air using a vaporizer (either cool mist or warm mist.) This will help relieve a sore throat and dry cough;

• Getting enough rest. Fatigue can increase the duration of symptoms. Staying in bed will also avoid spreading the infection to others;

• Using saline drops or spray to loosen nasal congestion; and petrolatum jelly products to soothe raw skin around your nose;

• Using non-medicated hard lozenges or candy to soothe a sore throat or cough;

• Gargling with salt water to relieve a dry throat;

• Taking ibuprofen or acetaminophen to fight fever.
Ducking the bug

Knowing how the flu spreads, the best way to prevent catching the virus is by practicing good hygiene:

• Live well – eat a balanced diet, get a good night’s sleep and exercise regularly;

• Wash your hands frequently, for at least 20 seconds – the length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday – using soap and warm water – especially before and after cooking, eating or taking medication; after wiping your nose or if you use your hands to cover your mouth to sneeze or cough; and after using the washroom or handling pets;

• Avoid coughing or sneezing into your hand. Use your elbow, sleeve or a tissue if you are sneezing or coughing; discard the used tissue immediately;

• Avoid touching your eyes, mouth and nose;

• Avoid engaging in handshakes, hugs and kisses;

• Clean hard surfaces with a disinfectant; influenza can survive on surfaces for eight to 48 hours;

• Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer, only if soap and warm water aren’t available.

• Stay home if you’re sick!

Give it a shot!

Only flu antibodies can prevent flu. The only way to generate antibodies is to be infected or to get vaccinated. The vaccine is more than 80 per cent effective in preventing flu in healthy adults, provided it is a good match with the circulating flu strains. It’s given to anyone classified as high risk, health workers and those who want to avoid the flu.

It takes about two weeks for a flu shot’s protection to kick in.

Side effects from getting the flu shot, other than slight arm pain, are extremely rare. The benefits of the shot outweigh the risks.

Immunity from a flu shot lasts less than one year. Furthermore, there are different forms of the flu that can mutate and change from year to year. Last year’s flu shot may not protect you from this year’s flu.

Though it’s best to get the flu shot early in the flu season (October or November), getting it later is better than not getting it at all.

For more information on the flu shot, please visit www.gettheflushot.ca

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