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Flu season: Tips for prevention and symptom relief

It's that time of year again; flu season is here. It can knock you off your feet for days and leave you feeling exhausted. Unfortunately, there is no cure for the flu. Once you have the virus, you are forced to wait it out. But there are ways to help your body hasten its way past the fever, aches and pains—and with a little foresight and precaution—stay healthy and active through the entire winter season.

Tips for Staying Bug-Free

Although the flu is easily spread, there are some precautions you can take to keep you and your family germ-free throughout the year. Consider this helpful advice:

Wash your hands frequently. Your hands are the most common vehicles for carrying germs. Wash with soap and water often: after being in public places, before eating all meals, and any other time you think you might have picked up germs.

Avoid touching your nose, eyes and mouth. You can't keep all the germs off your hands all the time, so keep your hands away from germs' most common entranceways to the body.

Keep your distance. If you know someone who has the flu, give him or her plenty of space. The virus is often spread through airborne transmission (i.e., droplets of saliva that travel through the air from coughing or sneezing). Generally within one to four days of breathing in these germs, you can come down with the flu, but infected people can be contagious even before symptoms appear.

Keep surfaces clean. Some viruses, including the flu, can survive and be transmitted on a variety of surfaces. Wipe down doorknobs, counters, light switches, sinks, etc. on a regular basis in your home.

Eat a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids. Most nutritional experts agree that over the long run, a balanced diet—one that's big on whole grains, unprocessed foods and includes the four major food groups—is the best way to keep your body healthy. Also, consider drinking more fluids if you are feeling sluggish. Fatigue is often a sign of mild dehydration. Eight glasses of water a day is standard.

Get plenty of sleep. Give your immune system some "recovery" time with a good night's sleep; it's a necessary requirement to maintain good health. Most experts agree that children and teens require a minimum of nine hours of sleep to stay healthy and alert. For adults, eight hours is recommended as a benefit to overall health.

Give your immune system a boost. Simply put, you need flu antibodies to prevent the flu. Each year, vaccines are updated to include the most common flu strains. And although it's possible to fall victim to a different strain of the flu, it still prevents or lessens the symptoms associated with the inactivated (or dead) strains found in the vaccine.

Consult with your physician or local public health authority. Get information on the different flu strains, the best time to get vaccinated, and determine if you are in a high-risk group that should consider vaccination (e.g. the young, the elderly or those with a chronic illness). Of the two main types of influenza (A and B), Type A usually causes more severe illness than Type B. Type A can result in pneumonia, hospitalization or even death.

Flu Etiquette

When you have the flu, the last thing you want to do is spread the virus to your friends and family. Consider the following tips on how to keep your germs to yourself:

- **Wash your hands every two hours.** Anti-bacterial lotion alone is not recommended, but is extremely effective when used in combination with hand washing.
- **Use tissues instead of handkerchiefs to cover sneezes and coughs.** Throw them away, and wash your hands immediately.
- **Avoid shaking hands and sharing mugs, plates or utensils.** When you have the flu, personal contact is an easy way to transmit the virus.
- **Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.** It will help deter the airborne spread of germs to others.
- **Clean shared work surfaces and areas with disinfectant.** This includes keyboards, phones, photocopiers, joint room keys, equipment handles or any other common areas at work.
- **Avoid crowds and group gatherings whenever possible.** Flu viruses are contagious approximately three to five days from the onset of symptoms in adults, and up to seven days in children. Confined or enclosed environments speed up its mode of transportation.

Is It a Cold or the Flu?

The flu is a specific infection caused by influenza viruses and is usually more severe than the common cold. Typically, it includes a sudden onset of headaches, chills and coughing, followed by a fever, loss of appetite, muscle aches and extreme exhaustion. Gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, can sometimes accompany the flu, especially in children.

The common cold is typically limited to the upper respiratory tract with runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation. It can be accompanied by tiredness, but it’s rare to experience extreme exhaustion from a cold. It’s also uncommon to experience headaches or fever.

Cold and flu symptoms resemble each other, but they differ in intensity. Call your healthcare provider if you have a cold or illness accompanied by a fever of 101 degrees or higher; a rash covering most of your body; persistent ear, tooth or sinus pain; difficulty swallowing; shortness of breath or wheezing; chest pain; a cough producing blood; or a cough lasting three weeks or longer.

Once You Have the Flu

Treating the symptoms is your only recourse for as long as they last (typically one to two weeks). This means fluids, plenty of rest, and for adults, ASA (Acetylsalicylic Acid) or Acetaminophen to keep your fever down.

Children and teenagers with the flu should avoid ASA or drugs related to aspirin, unless specifically directed by a physician. The combination of ASA and the flu virus is linked to Reye's syndrome—a rare complication in children that affects the central nervous system and the liver.

Recently, new medications have become available specifically designed to treat the flu. These drugs may decrease the length of time that symptoms persist by an average of one to one-and-a-half days, if treatment begins within 24 to 48 hours of the onset of the illness.

Whenever flu season approaches, remember the preventative tips mentioned in this article to keep you and your family germ-free. But if you or someone you know does catch the virus, know that flu

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symptoms are only temporary, and that there are ways to alleviate them. If you experience severe symptoms or have deeper concerns, be sure to contact a medical professional.