



Help to prevent the flu

The H1N1 virus got a whole lot of attention during last year's flu season, as it was the first flu pandemic in more than 40 years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) professionals believe that the flu is primarily spread when an infected person speaks, sneezes or coughs. Anyone can get influenza, but rates of infection are highest among children. In February, the CDC made a recommendation that people over six months of age should be vaccinated for influenza every year, beginning with this flu season.

Here are a few basic facts: Flu-like symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people may also have vomiting and diarrhea. People may be infected with the flu and have respiratory symptoms, without a fever. For most people, symptoms last only a few days. Other illnesses can have the same symptoms and are often mistaken for influenza.

Infants, the elderly, pregnant women and people with certain health conditions can become much sicker. Each year, thousands of people die from seasonal influenza and even more require hospitalization. The regular flu season starts in October and ends sometime around May with the most severe outbreaks during January.

CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine as the first and most important step in protecting against flu viruses. Here are some facts about the vaccination:

- While there are many different flu viruses, the flu vaccine protects against the three viruses that research suggests will be most common.
- The 2010-2011 flu vaccine will protect against an influenza A H3N2 virus, an influenza B virus and the 2009 H1N1 virus that caused so much illness last season.
- Everyone six months of age and older should get vaccinated as soon as this season's vaccine is available.
- People at high risk of serious flu complications include young children, pregnant women, people with chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes or heart and lung disease and people 65 years and older.
- Vaccination of high-risk persons is especially important to decrease their risk of severe flu illness.

- Vaccination also is important for health care workers and other people who live with or care for high-risk people to keep from spreading flu to high-risk people.
- Children younger than six months are at high risk of serious flu illness but are too young to be vaccinated. People who care for them should be vaccinated instead.

To help ward off the flu, take everyday preventive actions to stop the spread of germs, such as:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you are sick with flu-like illness, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.)
- While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.

If you do get sick, take flu antiviral drugs if your doctor prescribes them. Benefits of these medications include:

- Antiviral drugs are different from antibiotics. They are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) and are not available over-the-counter.
- Antiviral drugs can make illness milder and shorten the time you are sick. They may also prevent serious flu complications.
- It's very important that antiviral drugs be used early (within the first two days of symptoms) to treat people who are very sick (such as those who are hospitalized) or people who are sick with flu symptoms and who are at increased risk of severe flu illness, such as pregnant women, young children, people 65 and older and people with certain chronic health conditions.

More information on seasonal influenza can be found on the CDC website at flu.gov or by calling 800-CDC-INFO. ✉