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Influenza

What is influenza (the flu)?

Influenza, commonly called “the flu,” is caused by the influenza virus, which infects the respiratory tract (nose, throat, lungs). The flu usually spreads from person to person when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks and the virus is sent into the air. The flu is more likely than other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, to cause severe illness and life-threatening complications.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Influenza is a respiratory illness. Symptoms of flu include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny nose, and muscle aches. Children can have additional gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults. Although the term “stomach flu” is sometimes used to describe vomiting, nausea, or diarrhea, these illnesses are caused by certain other viruses, bacteria, or possibly parasites, and are rarely related to influenza.

Does the flu have complications?

Yes. Some of the complications caused by flu include predisposition to bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections as complications also. Those aged 65 years and older and persons of any age with chronic medical conditions are at highest risk for serious complications of flu.

How do I find out if I have the flu?

It is very difficult to distinguish the flu from other viral or bacterial causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. A test can confirm that an illness is influenza if the patient is tested within the first two to three days after symptoms begin. In addition, a doctor’s examination may

be needed to determine whether a person has a complication of influenza.

How soon will I get sick if I am exposed to the flu?

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about one to four days, with an average of about two days.

How long is someone who has the flu contagious?

Persons are infectious usually from one day prior to becoming sick to about 5 days after they first develop symptoms. Children may be contagious longer, and some are infectious for 6 days after they become ill.

What can I do to protect myself against the flu?

By far, the single best way to prevent the flu is for individuals, especially persons at high risk for serious complications from the flu, to get the flu vaccine each fall. Two types of influenza vaccine are now available. Inactivated (killed) flu vaccine, or the “flu shot,” has been used for many years. The second vaccine is a live intranasal flu vaccine (FluMist™) licensed in 2003. FluMist™ is only approved for healthy persons 5 to 49 years of age, and should not be used for those at risk for complications from influenza.

Can the flu shot give you the flu?

No. The licensed injectable flu vaccine used in the United States, which is made from inactivated or killed flu viruses, cannot cause the flu and does not cause flu illness.

Who should get a flu shot?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that persons who are at risk for developing serious complications from the flu receive the vaccine. These

include people 65 years old or older; children aged 6 to 23 months; adults and children with any chronic health condition, such as heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, asthma, cancer, HIV/AIDS; or any woman more than 3 months pregnant during the flu season. It is also recommended for household contacts or caregivers of someone at high risk, health care workers, and healthy people 50-64 years of age. Due to current limited vaccine stock, the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services recommends that health care provider prioritize administration of the vaccine to those at highest risk for complications from flu.

Does the flu shot really work?

When the viruses in the vaccine and circulating viruses are similar, the flu vaccine is very effective. However, people who have gotten a flu vaccination may then get sick from a different virus that causes respiratory illness but is mistaken for flu; flu vaccine only prevents illness caused by the influenza virus. In addition, protection from the vaccine is not 100%. Studies of healthy young adults have shown flu vaccine to be up to 90% effective in preventing the flu. In the elderly and those with certain long-term medical conditions, the flu shot is often less effective in preventing illness. However, in the elderly, flu vaccine is very effective in reducing hospitalizations and death from flu-related causes.

Can antiviral drugs cure the flu?

When started within the first two days of illness, they can reduce the duration of the disease but cannot cure it outright. All antiviral drugs must be prescribed by a doctor. These drugs are effective against flu viruses, but they are not effective against other viruses or bacteria that can cause symptoms similar to influenza. These drugs are not effective for treating bacterial infections that can occur as complications of influenza.

What else can I do to help prevent the spread of the flu?

In addition to getting the flu vaccine, there are other things you can do. These include: 1) stay away from persons who are sick, or if you are sick, stay home from work, school or social activities; 2) cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing; 3) wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and hot water, or use alcohol-based hand gel; and 4) properly dispose of used tissues.

When is the flu season in the United States?

In the United States, the peak of flu season usually occurs anywhere from late December through March. The health impact (infections and deaths) of a flu season varies from year to year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention monitors circulating flu viruses and their related disease activity and provides influenza reports each week from October through May. Influenza is also monitored in New Hampshire by reports from health care providers, long-term care facilities, and schools, and by reports of flu culture test results from the Public Health Laboratories.

Do I have to get the flu vaccine every year?

Those who are in the recommended groups to get the vaccine need to get it every year. The flu viruses are constantly changing. Generally, new influenza strains circulate every flu season, so the vaccine is changed every year.

How many people get sick or die from the flu each year?

Each flu season is unique, but it is estimated that approximately 10% to 20% of U.S. residents get the flu, and an average of 114,000 persons are hospitalized for flu-related complications. About 36,000 Americans die on average per year from the complications of flu.

Do other respiratory viruses circulate during the flu season?

In addition to the flu virus, several other respiratory viruses also can circulate during the flu season and can cause symptoms and illness similar to those seen with flu infection. These non-flu viruses include rhinovirus (one cause of the “common cold”) and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), which is the most common cause of severe respiratory illness in young children as well as a leading cause of death from respiratory illness in those aged 65 years and older.

For information about receiving the influenza vaccination or about the vaccine itself, contact the New Hampshire Immunization Program at 800-852-3345 x4482. For specific concerns about influenza, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Communicable Disease Control at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov or the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.state.nh.us.