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Information for You from Your Health Care Team

Influenza: "The Flu"

Winter means flu season. Many of us can relate to the fever, chills, body aches and multiple other discomforts that accompany the flu. What is the flu? Who is most susceptible to the flu? Is treatment available? Who requires the flu vaccine? Read on for the answers to these questions and more information.

The flu is the common name for Influenza, a virus that is common in the winter months. Flu season peaks between December and February every year in this part of the country. The illness may last from one to two weeks and is characterized by several days of fever, sore throat, cold and cough, all-over body aches, headache, chills, fatigue, poor appetite and weight loss. Children who contract the flu are more susceptible to ear infections, bronchitis and pneumonia that is viral and often not relieved by taking antibiotics. Fortunately, most people recover from the flu without much more than a lingering cold or cough.

The flu is considered harmful to children and adults who have chronic illness such as diabetes, asthma, cystic fibrosis, and heart disease. Also at risk are babies born premature (less than 37 weeks gestation) and adults over 65. These individuals are at greater risk of developing complications from having the flu. Therefore, it is recommended that people who fit these criteria or live in a household with people who suffer from chronic illness receive the flu vaccine. Immunization may also be considered for small children who attend day care. The vaccine is routinely given from October through the rest of the flu season. Children younger than nine years who have never been immunized need to receive two doses separated by one month. All others require one shot. The vaccine is not live, so a person should not contract flu after receiving the vaccine. The main side effect is some mild soreness in the arm where the shot is given.

Treatments are now available to help combat the flu. They do not prevent a person from getting the flu and they are not a cure, but they shorten the course and severity of the illness. All of the medicines must be started within 24-48 hours after the onset of symptoms to be effective. Therefore, you should contact your physician as soon as possible for an evaluation. There are currently four products on the market, but only two are approved for use in children: amantadine and rimantadine. These medicines are effective only against Influenza type A. They are recommended for use in children from one year and up and are available in liquid form. Potential side effects associated with taking these medications include nausea, dizziness and insomnia. Side effects are uncommon, and these medications are considered very safe. However, they are not recommended for use by nursing mothers at this time.

Remember to always contact your doctor if you suspect your child has the flu or complications from the flu.

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