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INFLUENZA - a patient's guide

Editorial Team

Overview

Influenza makes you feel much worse than a cold

It is highly contagious and spread by coughing and sneezing

Bad aches and pains are strong signs you may have the flu

Other symptoms include weakness, fever and the shivers

It can be serious in the elderly and people with weak immune systems

The flu can lead to pneumonia in serious cases and can be fatal

The flu vaccine is nearly 90 percent effective in preventing the illness

The elderly and people with chronic diseases are strongly advised to have a shot

What is it?

The flu is not just a bad cold. It is a virus which causes much more serious symptoms than a cold.

The flu is highly contagious and is spread by coughing and sneezing. Epidemics usually strike in late autumn and continue during winter.

It can be severe in the elderly or people with weak immune systems, and can lead to pneumonia and death.

There are two main strains of the influenza virus, type A and type B, with A being the most serious strain and the cause of the worst epidemics.

The incubation period is between one and two days.

The flu can be prevented by a flu vaccine which is nearly 90 percent effective.

What are the symptoms?

The flu may feel like a cold at first, but the symptoms get quickly worse, leaving the patient tired and weak. Bad aches and pains in the back and limbs are tell tale signs of the flu.

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Initial symptoms include headache, tiredness, the shivers, feeling hot or cold, and aches and pains. These may be followed by a sore throat, coughing and a runny nose.

The infection may spread to the lungs causing bronchitis or pneumonia.

As other serious conditions such as meningitis and pneumonia may cause similar symptoms, it is advisable to have an examination with your doctor.

Some warning signs of other conditions could be severe headache, sore neck (meningitis) or bad coughing, breathing problems and chest pains (pneumonia).

What can be done to help?

There is no cure for the flu. Antibiotics do not help, unless a secondary bacterial infection has developed.

Bed rest is the best remedy. Drink lots of fluid and take paracetamol to ease the symptoms. Orange and lemon juice may help.

Consult your doctor if the symptoms get worse or you don't feel better after a few days.

How can it be prevented?

The flu vaccine is effective at preventing the illness in the majority of people who get it.

It is approximately 90% effective in preventing both types A and B, and will possibly reduce the severity of infection in someone who does still get it.

It takes up to 14 days after an injection for the vaccine to become fully effective. People are immune for about one year.

The flu vaccine is changed every year in response to the changing viruses going around.

Strong candidates for a flu injection include the elderly, people with chronic diseases, and those with weak immune systems, and health care workers.

People wanting to avoid having time off work or being sick on holiday may also want to be immunised.

Pregnant women, people with bleeding disorders and people allergic to eggs should not have a flu injection.

Side effects from the injection include feeling off color for a day or two and swelling at the injection site.

Future trends

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Public health programs will concentrate on targeting at risk groups for the vaccine.

There are also predictions of a new flu virus emerging, causing a worldwide epidemic in future