

INFLUENZA--The "FLU"

09/2011

Influenza is a virus that causes periodic epidemics of severe "flu" symptoms, mainly fever, cough, cold, aches and pains, sore throat, and generalized discomfort. The onset is usually rapid, with the severity of the symptoms depending on the age, prior conditions, and even the time of day. Most influenza epidemics create symptoms that last for 5 to 10 days. Influenza cannot be helped by antibiotics as can bacterial infections like strep throat, or ear infections, although in a major outbreaks we might try an anti-flu medicine such as Tamiflu if caught very early, within the first 36 hours of symptoms. Unfortunately, these medications may be subject to shortages at local pharmacies, may not be effective for the 2012 flu strain, and may cause some confusion temporarily. While these drugs often work well to shorten or lessen the severity of the illness, they do not necessarily prevent secondary bacterial infections such as pneumonia.

Some people confuse the "flu" as described above, with the "stomach flu" of vomiting and diarrhea. Actually the "stomach flu" is not influenza at all, and is a totally different disease. Influenza does not usually cause vomiting or diarrhea. The term influenza comes from the Middle Ages when people stricken with this illness were considered under the 'influence' of evil spirits.

Usually all that we can do is treat each symptom as it crops up. Fever in younger children can be treated with the appropriate dose of ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or acetaminophen (Tylenol) in liquid, chewable, swallowable, or suppository form. In children without stomach upset, ibuprofen probably works better against the aches, pains, and fever of the flu. Remember to NEVER give aspirin to a child with the flu because of a rare illness called Reye's syndrome.

Coughs and colds can be treated with whatever medicine you have that works best in your child. If you have no preference, a Benadryl or Delsym are probably two of the best. You can also try Vicks VapoRub medicines. A teaspoonful of honey can sooth a bad cough and sore throat quite well, but do not use in infants less than 1 year old. Give popsicles and Chloraseptic spray for severe sore throat.

Some 10% of flu stricken individuals may develop a secondary infection, such as ear infection or bronchitis, in which case, call us for an appointment if the symptoms point to a problem. If your child shows symptoms of severe breathing distress, of course, go directly to the emergency room.

In general give plenty of clear liquids and soup, and run a humidifier. Recent research indicates that adding humidity to the air by using a humidifier or vaporizer can actually decrease the spread of the flu.

Your child may not return to school unless the fever has been gone for 24 hours, the child feels okay, and is no longer coughing so much as to be a nuisance.

PREVENTION OF FLU

If your child has asthma, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis or is between the ages of 6 to 24 months they are considered to be at higher risk for flu complications. Flu immunization is highly recommended for ALL people over 6 months of age. Currently it comes in two forms when available. The traditional **flu shot** is a killed vaccine that stimulates the immunity against the flu. **FluMist** is a nasal spray form that is a weakened, but live form of the flu virus. FluMist can be given only to otherwise healthy individuals over 2 years of age. Flu vaccines cannot cause the flu, although side effects for a day can include a flu-like aches and fever. If your child is **our** patient, you are welcome to call our office to get an appointment for the flu vaccine, but realize that the vaccine may not provide protection for a week or more. Go to www.cdc.gov to access the Vaccine Information Statements on these vaccines. For the latest information from the RI Department of Health, go to www.health.state.ri.us.

And, yes, both Dr. Concannon and Dr. Vitale, all our staff, and our families (children, too) receive their flu vaccines yearly!

Rhode Islanders should minimize their risk of getting influenza by taking the following steps:

- Wash hands often. Use warm water and soap, or Purell hand cleaner.
- Stay away from sick people. Influenza is spread when infected people cough and sneeze. If you are sick, stay at home. Be sure to cough or sneeze into the elbow of your arm to prevent germ spread.
- During a flu epidemic, call your doctor early if true influenza-like symptoms develop. There may be medications that can be given to minimize the effects of influenza.

Good Luck!