

House Calls

The “Flu Bug” Strikes Again

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

Many people will agree that autumn is the perfect time of year to enjoy the Outer Banks. Beautiful weather, desolate beaches, and diminished traffic are just a few of the niceties of the fall.

Unfortunately, there is one unwelcome visitor that returns to our area year after year that tends to put a damper on the enjoyment of the season. That pesky intruder is none other than the “flu bug”.

If you've ever had the misfortune of having the flu sneak into your home, you know the misery that little bug can cause. It hits you like a Mack truck, and shows no mercy. No need to look for sympathy from your family members or co-workers, because WHAM, before you know it, they have it too!

Influenza (the flu) is a highly contagious disease that is caused by the influenza virus. Its symptoms usually come on suddenly and typically include fever, headache, tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, nasal congestion, and body aches.

Children can have additional stomach symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults.

It is typically transmitted when a person who has the flu coughs or sneezes, sends the virus into the air, and other people inhale it. The virus enters the nose, throat, or lungs of a person and begins to multiply, causing symptoms of the flu.

A person can begin spreading the flu one day before they feel sick; adults can continue to pass the virus to others for another 3-7 days after symptoms start, and

children can be contagious for longer than 7 days. The flu-like symptoms generally start 1-4 days after the virus enters the body and can last up to one to two weeks.

Anyone can get the flu. Although many people who become infected will recover completely with just the help of their own immune system and some extra TLC, serious problems from the flu can happen at any age.

Dehydration and secondary bacterial infections such as pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus and ear infections are examples of complications from the flu. It can also make chronic health problems worse, such as asthma and diabetes.

The best way to avoid the attack of the flu bug is to get the influenza vaccine each fall, before the flu season strikes (preferably in October or November). The flu shot usually has a 70-90% protection rate against that year's flu virus.

A flu shot can be given to anyone over 6 months old who wants to avoid the flu. People with chronic medical conditions and those older than 65 are more likely to get complications from the flu, and are especially encouraged to get the flu shot each year. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) also recommends that women who will be beyond the first three months of pregnancy during the flu season, and those pregnant women who have chronic medical problems that increase their risk for complications from the flu should also get the flu shot, no matter their stage of pregnancy.

It is safe to get a flu shot if you are breastfeeding, and because children aged 6-23 months are at substantially increased risk for flu-related hospitalizations, a flu shot for all children in this age group is encouraged when feasible.

Because the influenza vaccine is not made from a live virus, it cannot “cause” the flu. However, some people may have a slight reaction to it, which can cause a low grade fever, and a generalized ill feeling for one to two days. You should not receive the flu shot if you have a latex or chicken egg allergy. Contact your medical provider or health department for flu shot availability.

If you find yourself experiencing flu-like symptoms, they are best treated with rest, plenty of liquids, avoidance of alcohol and tobacco use, and medications to relieve the symptoms.

Remember, the flu is caused by a virus, so antibiotics (like penicillin) do not work to cure it.

Never give aspirin to children with flu-like symptoms, because it can cause a rare, yet serious illness called Reye syndrome.

There are antiviral medications that may be prescribed by your medical provider if indicated. These medications must be started within the first 48 hours of the symptoms of the illness, and do not cure the flu, but they can reduce the duration by one day. Antiviral medications are not right for everyone, and are not effective for treating bacterial infections that can occur as complications of the flu.

Of course, one thing you should always stockpile; the secret weapon against that pesky intruder...Grandma's chicken soup!

Rikki Schuster is a certified Physician Assistant with over seven years of Emergency Medicine and Urgent Care experience; including two and a half years on the Outer Banks. She is currently providing Medical House Calls for acute, non-life threatening illnesses in your home, school, or workplace. She

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