

House Calls

by Rikki Schuster, PA-C

Due to the severe shortage of the influenza vaccination this year, many people may have the flu on their minds. Unfortunately, many of us that are used to being immunized yearly and presumed 'safe' from the flu are finding ourselves vulnerable to the infection. Beginning and sustaining a healthy lifestyle is going to be your greatest line of defense this year. Eating balanced, healthy meals, getting adequate sleep and plenty of exercise will definitely help you safeguard against what is predicted to be a serious outbreak of the influenza virus.

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.

The flu 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 actually 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 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 plenty of rest, serious complications from the flu can happen at any age.

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

Of course, the best way to avoid the flu is by getting an influenza vaccine each fall. Since that is not an option for many of us this year, there are definitely some courses of action that can be taken to help decrease the spreading of the disease. Try to avoid any close contact with people who are sick. If you are sick, keep your distance from others. You should stay home from work, school, and running errands when you are sick. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Wash your hands often, preferably with soap and water. You can also use an antibacterial hand gel or wipe that contains alcohol if soap and water is not available.

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 help relieve the symptoms. Remember the flu is caused by a virus, so antibiotics do not work to cure it. You should never give aspirin to children with flu-like symptoms, because it can cause a rare, yet serious illness called Reyes syndrome. Acetaminophen and Ibuprofen are generally safe medications to use to help relieve both fever and body aches.

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 medicines are not right for everyone, and are not effective for treating bacterial infections that can occur as complications of the flu. If you are concerned that your symptoms are worsening after 5-7 days, and that you may have a secondary bacterial infection, you should consult your medical provider for an evaluation.

By adopting a healthy lifestyle, and being conscientious of our hand washing, we can all do our best to diminish the spread of the flu. Have a happy and healthy holiday season.

Rikki Schuster, PA-C is a certified physician assistant with 9 years of emergency medicine and urgent care experience. She is currently practicing with 'Medical House Calls' and will come to your home, work, school, rental cottage or hotel for evaluation and treatment of minor medical illnesses. Call 252-475-2007 for more information.