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Do I Have the Flu? What to Do

“I was just sitting at my desk, when all of a sudden my head and body started aching. I felt a fever coming over me, and I was exhausted. What is going on?” You may have caught the influenza virus—or “flu” for short. According to Denita Young, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent in Rains County, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the flu virus is its sudden onset. Symptoms may include fever, headache, body aches, extreme tiredness, runny or stuffy nose, dry (nonproductive) cough, and sore throat. The influenza virus is a highly contagious respiratory illness in humans, which means it attacks the nose, throat, and lungs in our bodies. “Influenza is often confused with what people refer to as the stomach flu,” says Extension Health Associate, Janet Pollard. “The main symptoms of stomach flu are nausea, profuse vomiting, and often diarrhea. What we refer to as stomach flu is not really flu because it is not caused by the influenza virus but rather by other viruses, bacteria, or parasites that cause illness. Although children and a few adults may experience nausea or feelings of being ‘sick to your stomach’ as a symptom of influenza, it is not the main symptom but rather a secondary symptom of the flu that is often brought on by fever or congestion.”

“If you do catch the flu virus, remember that your doctor won’t prescribe antibiotics since antibiotics only kill bacteria and not viruses,” explains Young. “If you suspect you have the flu, however, it is important to see your doctor right away since he/she may be able to prescribe antiviral medications to reduce the severity of your symptoms. These medications must be taken within two days of the onset of symptoms to be effective.” In addition, it is recommended to treat your flu symptoms with 1) rest, 2) plenty of liquids (primarily clear broths and beverages, not cream soups or milk), 3) over-the-counter medications for your particular symptoms (contact your doctor for recommendations), and 4) avoidance of alcohol and tobacco products.

Influenza is highly contagious, so you should also try to isolate the person who has the virus. Stay home from work, and have children stay home from school or other activities where they might expose others.

Of course, the best thing you can do is to not catch the influenza virus in the first place. One of the best ways to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated. Flu vaccines are given at most doctors’ offices and health clinics. You can also go to the American Lung Association’s flu clinic locator website at <http://www.lungusa.org> and enter your zip code to find a location offering flu vaccines near you. “Also,” says Young, “practice good hand washing habits. Use soap and warm running water, rubbing your hands together to remove any germs. Be sure to wash your hands long enough—encourage children to sing ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’ or say their ABCs (the whole alphabet) while they’re washing their hands; when they finish, they’re also finished with hand washing.” “If running water is not available,” says Pollard, “use a hand sanitizer that contains alcohol. These products can be squeezed onto the hands and simply rubbed in without water.” Always cover your mouth when coughing, sneezing, or wiping your nose. Use disposable paper

tissues that can be thrown away after each use to reduce the spread of the flu virus. Using a cloth or handkerchief can contribute to the spread of the virus since the virus can remain on the surface of the cloth and spread wherever it might be set down or touched by others.

Take care of yourself this flu season! Remember to take precautions to prevent becoming infected.

Source: Janet M. Pollard, M.P.H., Extension Associate – Health, Texas AgriLife Extension Service. October 2005. (Texas AgriLife Extension Service Family and Consumer Sciences website: <http://fcs.tamu.edu>)

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