

The Flu...It is that Time of Year

We survived the holidays! Now with ideas of shedding those extra pounds and getting healthy, we must also remember that flu season is upon us. *Josefa B. Peña, MPH, Program Specialist - Adult Health, Texas AgriLife Extension Service*, reminds us in the following article that being prepared and knowing the facts is the best prevention.

Influenza, more commonly known as the flu, is a contagious illness caused by a virus that affects the upper respiratory system (nose, mouth, sinuses, and throat). The flu virus spreads easily from person to person and can live on surfaces for hours. The flu season occurs every year from October to May and affects up to 20 percent of the U.S. population.

Symptoms

- High fever (100 °F and above)
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Muscle aches or pain
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Headache
- Lack of energy
- May cause diarrhea, nausea, and vomiting

Possible Complications

- Ear infection
- Sinus infection
- Dehydration
- Pneumonia

Spread

The flu spreads easily from person to person. It can be “caught” by:

- Breathing airborne droplets of the flu virus from others’ coughs or sneezes.
- Touching virus-contaminated surfaces (tables, doorknobs, telephones) and then touching your nose, mouth, or eyes with virus-contaminated hands.

Prevention

- Get an annual flu shot in the fall before the flu season starts.
- Stay 3 to 6 feet away from others who are sick.
- Stop kissing and hugging others until you are well.
- Remain at home when sick. Do not return to school or work until your fever is below 100 °F for at least 24 hours without using fever-reducing medicine.*
- Wash your hands frequently for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water, or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer when water is not available.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Strengthen your immune system with healthy lifestyle habits. Eat a balanced diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables. Get plenty of rest. Sleep at least 7 to 8 hours a night. Exercise regularly—at least 30 minutes of activity most days of the week. Reduce your daily stress level.

Home Treatment

- Stay home and rest.
- Drink plenty of fluids (water, juice, electrolyte drinks).
- Take over-the-counter medications to ease symptoms.
- Antiviral medications are available by prescription from your doctor.**
- Run a cool-mist humidifier. Clean it regularly according to the instruction manual to prevent mold.

See a Doctor When

- A young child, pregnant woman, elderly person, or someone with a chronic health condition becomes ill with the flu—they have an increased chance of flu complications.
- A stiff neck develops along with fever.
- Complications, such as difficulty breathing or signs of dehydration occur.
- Symptoms worsen each day.
- You are concerned and need advice.

** Fever-reducing medicines include Acetaminophen (Tylenol, generic brand), Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, generic brand), and aspirin. Do not give aspirin to anyone younger than 20 years old because of the danger of Reye's syndrome, a rare but serious illness.*

****** To be effective, take antiviral medications within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms. Antiviral medications are recommended for people with a high risk of having flu complications.

For more information about the flu, visit the Texas Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) website at texashelp.tamu.edu. or contact the local Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903-473-4580.

Produced by AgriLife Communications. The Texas A&M University System July 2010 *Josefa B. Peña, MPH, Program Specialist - Adult Health*