

THE “FLU” (Influenza)

Definition - The “flu” is an illness caused by Influenza virus. Outbreaks occur each year, usually between November and April. Different strains of the virus circulate each year, so people don’t get long-lasting immunity after infection.

Symptoms

- Sudden onset
- Fever, usually over 101 degrees
- Headache, body aches
- Fatigue
- Sore throat, congested nose
- Bad cough, sometimes croup
- Belly pain, vomiting

The flu is different from a routine cold

- The fever is higher and longer-lasting
- The fatigue is worse and longer-lasting, up to two weeks
- Headache, body aches are worse with flu
- Cough is more severe and long-lasting with the flu
- Complications are much more likely with the flu

Diagnosis

- Usually diagnosed by symptoms and examination
- Tests of nasal secretions obtained by swab are sometimes done to confirm the diagnosis but are not always necessary

Treatment

- Supportive measures to improve comfort
 - Tylenol or ibuprofen for fever or pain
 - NEVER use aspirin for flu (can cause Reyes Syndrome)
 - Plenty of fluids
 - Plenty of rest
 - Humidified air to breathe
 - Saline spray or gel for the nose
 - Cough and cold medicines are not used for children under two and avoided for children under six
- Anti-viral drugs such as tamiflu
 - These drugs interfere with the virus’ ability to reproduce

- These drugs should be started in the first 24-48 hours of illness
- These drugs may shorten the course of the illness by ½-1 day, and may blunt the severity of the symptoms
- Side effects are a problem, especially for children, and may include
 - Vomiting
 - Headache
 - Neuropsychiatric symptoms such as hallucinations, delirium, intense bad dreams
- These drugs are sometimes used to *prevent* the flu in people at high risk for complications because of underlying illness (this is called “prophylaxis”)
- Antibiotics
 - Influenza is a *virus*, not a bacteria. Antibiotics work *only* against bacteria and therefore do *not* help with the flu.

Complications

- Most cases of flu resolve uneventfully after 1-2 weeks
- Ear infections or sinus infections may occur as a complication of the flu
- Dehydration may occur if fluid intake is low or vomiting is severe
- Certain people are at higher risk for severe complications of the flu
 - Those with asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, weak immune systems
 - Infants and toddlers
- Even healthy persons may have severe complications of the flu such as pneumonia, though this is rare
 - Watch for:
 - **Return of fever after 24 hours without fever**
 - **Fever lasting 5 days or more**
 - **Worsening breathing pattern, such as rapid panting breaths, grunting with each breath, flaring nostrils, using muscles of the ribcage or abdomen to push air in the lungs**

Prevention

- Flu is spread person to person through the air from coughing or sneezing
 - Cover nose and mouth, wash hands! Avoid kissing a person with flu.
- Flu is spread by indirect contact with secretions on surfaces such as toys or doorknobs
 - Throw tissues away after use, wash hands!
 - Don’t share towels, cups, etc. Use paper cups in the kitchen and bathroom. Wash dishes and clothes in hot water
 - Wipe all surfaces, including toys, with disinfectant
- Avoid exposure to tobacco smoke – exposed children cough and wheeze more and recover more slowly
- Flu is contagious from the day before symptoms start and up to 10 days after
- **Get flu vaccine!**

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