



Special

Flu + vaccines

Arming yourself with information is the first best defence this cold and flu season

Q&A with Dr. Bonnie Henry, Chair, Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness and Promotion

As we approach flu season, what measures should we take to protect ourselves and our children?
The best ways to prevent any type of respiratory virus are simple: wash your hands frequently, cover your mouth when you cough, and sneeze into your sleeve. If you have a fever, stay home, because fever is a good indicator that you're fighting off something that might be contagious to others.

Influenza is the most serious of the respiratory illnesses around at this time of year, but we have a very safe and effective vaccine. It protects us and the people around us from influenza.

What symptoms should we look out for?

The symptoms of influenza are much more severe than those of the common cold and may include a very high fever and headache, often with sudden onset, within half an hour or a few minutes. It affects the lungs and breathing passages, so you may have symptoms such as a cough. Even healthy individuals describe it as 'being hit by a truck,' and report profound fatigue or exhaustion. Recovery can take a week to two weeks.

When we do get the flu, what are the recommended treatments?



It's best to try to prevent it in the first place. But if you do get sick with influenza, rest and drink plenty of fluids to help your body's immune system fight off the virus.

For people with underlying illnesses such as heart disease or

immune system problems, antiviral medications may help as well. But to work best, they should be taken within the first 24 to 48 hours of the onset of symptoms. If you or your children have underlying illnesses such as asthma or cystic fibrosis,

or are undergoing treatment for cancer, talk to your doctor ahead of time about antiviral medication.

What should we know about the new vaccines approved for use in Canada this year?

One is a nasal spray called FluMist. It's a live vaccine, but the virus is 'attenuated' or killed. Rather than being injected, it is sprayed in your nose. There is good data that shows it's really effective, particularly in children between the ages of two and 18. It may not be available in provincial public programs, but you can get it from your physician.

The other thing that's new this year is a vaccine with an adjuvant for the immunization of seniors. The immune systems of older people don't respond as well as those of younger people, so the protection they get from vaccines is not as good. This new vaccine has a compound that helps boost the immune system. It's available in some provinces for individuals over the age of 75, and we're hoping it will help them get a better response from the immunization.

When should people with flu symptoms go to the hospital?

It varies by health condition and age. If young children have any difficulty breathing at all, take them in or call the Nurse Line or your physician for advice. For adults, the really worrisome symptom is severe difficulty taking a breath. The influenza virus can cause pneumonia, or you can develop secondary bacterial

pneumonia because of the inflammation caused by the virus. The signs are usually a high fever that won't go away and a decreased level of consciousness - individuals aren't as responsive and have real difficulty breathing.

Should we be concerned about the possibility of a continuation of the H1N1 outbreak this year?

The pandemic strain H1N1 came out of Mexico in 2009. We saw it again last year, and the patterns we've been monitoring around the world indicate it is likely we will see it again this year. But H1N1 is now included in the immunization, so this year's flu vaccine provides protection.

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