



The Flu

What are the symptoms?

Runny nose, sore throat, dry cough, headache, aching muscles and a high fever are the classic symptoms of influenza. When these symptoms happen in winter, the patient probably has the current strain of "the flu". The fevers and sweats last three to five days, but the cough and tiredness can persist for a week or more.

Symptoms are worse in young children and the elderly. Smokers often get additional bacterial infections. Patients with asthma will often experience a worsening of their cough and wheeze.

Those with other significant medical illnesses are prone to the complications of "the flu", such as pneumonia.

Treatment

Rest, fluids and aspirin or paracetamol are generally the mainstays of treatment. For children, paracetamol is better than aspirin, which doctors do not recommend.

Because the flu is viral, antibiotics are not effective. However, an antiviral agent, amantadine, may help resolve the symptoms if given early in the illness.

If the cough produces a thick sputum after the first five days, there may be a secondary bacterial infection. This should be treated with antibiotics.

Prevention through vaccination

About 85% of influenza deaths occur in those older than 65. These patients often have chronic heart and lung disease. Australian medical authorities recommend vaccinations to prevent the disease in these patients.

In bed with the flu. Rest and take plenty of fluids.



The flu vaccine is made with egg, so people with severe allergic reactions to eggs should not have the vaccine.

Although the effectiveness of the vaccine is only 60% in the elderly (it is 90% in healthy young adults), vaccination remains the best means of controlling the disease and lowering the death rate.

The virus strains change each year. This means that the body's immune system may not recognize the current strain, despite being effective at stopping the strains it has previously encountered. As a result, giving the vaccine each autumn is necessary.

When should I get a flu vaccination?

Vaccination should be done in March, April or May, but it can still be done in the early months of winter.

Are there any side effects?

Unlike the early influenza vaccines, today's vaccines cause few side effects. Slight redness and thickening at the injection site occurs in about 30% of patients. This usually settles within 48 hours. Aches and pains occasionally occur if the patient has not been exposed previously to one of the strains in the vaccine. This also settles within 48 hours. The vaccine can be given if you have a cold, but probably should be delayed

if you have a temperature.

Many people think the vaccine will stop them getting the common cold. This is not possible because the common cold is caused by a different virus.

Summary

Influenza is a potentially lethal disease for the elderly and for those with chronic heart and lung conditions. Vaccination is the most effective method we have of preventing illness and death. The side effects of vaccination are few and relatively mild.

