

Health Mart 2008

Influenza

As if out of nowhere, a wracking pain takes over your muscles and joints. You feel as though you're moving through molasses. Then you're hot—no, you're cold. Throbbing head, sore throat, stuffy nose, dry cough—this *really isn't* any fun. Dinner. . . who's hungry? You check your temperature, and sure enough, you've got a fever.

Welcome to winter. More likely than not, you've got influenza—more commonly called the flu.

Making its seasonal visit, influenza is a viral respiratory infection that is extremely contagious—spread through air droplets, from kissing, or by touching shared objects. You can pick up the flu from an infected person one day before symptoms begin and for seven days after its onset. Young children are infectious even longer.

Who's most at risk? The very young or old and those with a weakened immune system or chronic illness. Not surprisingly, nursing homes, and long-term care, health care or daycare facilities can also harbor these nasty bugs.

There are three main strains of influenza: A, B, and C. When you're infected, you develop antibodies, but unfortunately they don't protect you against constantly changing strains of A and B. That's why an annual flu shot in October or November is recommended for those most at risk. Safe for adults and children six months and older, it's not 100 percent protective, but it can lower your risk of getting the flu. And, if you do catch it, chances are you won't get as sick or suffer any complications. A nasal spray, called FluMist, is an alternative to the shot for healthy people ages 2 to 49 who are not pregnant.

You can take other precautions to stay off the flu sick list. As much as possible, try to limit air travel and avoid crowds from November to March. To prevent its spread, wash your hands often and use and toss tissues right away. Plenty of rest, healthy eating, and regular exercise will go a long way toward keeping your immune system up to snuff.

If you do catch the flu, about the best thing you can do is curl up in bed, drink plenty of liquids, and put chicken soup on the menu. Products that restore electrolytes, such as sports drinks, may also help. As needed, use pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, but steer clear of aspirin or salicylates for children. A humidifier may help clear congestion. Ask me about the benefits and drawbacks of other over-the-counter flu medicines.

If you're impatient about simply letting the flu take its course, you should know that your doctor may be able to shorten its length with prescription medications. These include Tamiflu (oseltamivir) and Relenza (zanamivir) for influenza A or B. You must take them

within 48 hours of the first flu symptoms. I can explain who can take each and what side effects to watch for.

Be sure to see your doctor if your symptoms worsen, last longer than about a week, or return after getting better. Chills, severe cough with phlegm, high fever, sharp chest pain, and other symptoms may be signs of pneumonia or another serious infections. Then, your medication is likely your best bet for getting on the road to recovery.
