



Fighting the flu – shots and new medications may help

By Ralph Monteagudo, DO, North Basin Medical Clinics



The chills. Fever. Muscle aches. Runny nose. Sore throat.

Most of us recognize the flu, but how many of us know what causes it, how to treat it or have looked at preventing the flu in our own homes? Here's a quick look at the flu and how to win the battle it promises to wage each year.

What is the flu?

Influenza – the flu – is a viral infection in the nose, throat and lungs. Because it is caused by a virus, antibiotics do little or nothing to fight the flu. Instead, preventing the flu and fighting symptoms to make our sick time more comfortable are our main strategies against the flu.

Prevention in the way of an annual flu vaccination is extremely important if you're in a high risk category. Each year, about 130,000 Americans go to the hospital with the flu and that doesn't include clinic visits and those who suffer at home. Of them, 20,000 people die of the flu and its complications, including pneumonia. Why take that risk when there is an inexpensive alternative – the flu shot?

What about Flu vaccine?

Flu vaccine is made of dead flu virus. When you get a shot, your body builds up antibodies to the flu virus to protect you when a live virus shows up in your blood stream. Each shot contains three strains of flu virus. The kinds of flu chosen for the vaccine are ones scientists believe are most likely to show up in the U.S. that given year. If scientists are wrong, you could still get the flu despite having a shot, but your symptoms should be milder.

Who's at higher risk for the flu?

- Those 50 and older
- Health care workers, care givers & those living in nursing homes
- People with lung problems such as asthma and emphysema
- Folks with suppressed immune systems or kidney problems
- People prone to chronic bronchitis
- Diabetics and people with heart disease or other long-term health problems

If you're pregnant, know that catching the flu will likely be harder on you than on your baby. Influenza hardly ever causes birth defects and rarely affects an unborn child. If you're concerned, talk to your physician about getting a flu shot.

When should I get a flu shot?

I recommend getting a flu shot at the start of flu season – generally in October or November. It is good for three months which should get you through the flu season.

What can I do if I get the flu?

With or without a flu shot, living with the flu for the week or two you're infected is not pleasant. Remember, when you have the flu you're contagious and can spread the virus to others. Stay home, especially when you have a fever. Drink plenty of water, juice and soups with clear broth. If your throat is sore, gargle with warm salt water or use over the counter sprays or lozenges to relieve pain. Get plenty of sleep as your body fights disease best when it's rested. Do not drink alcohol or smoke as these things make symptoms much worse.

What about flu medicines?

There are prescription flu medicines that can knock the severity of symptoms way back. They do not prevent the flu. However, these medications must be taken in the first 24-48 hours of the flu to be affective. If you wake up with flu symptoms and want to minimize their effects, call your physician right away to see if one of these medicines is right for you. If you don't get prescription flu medicine, feel free to use your favorite over-the-counter cold and flu medicine to knock back your symptoms and help you weather the storm.

Ralph Monteagudo, DO, is Board Certified in General Practice at Lincoln Hospital and North Basin Medical Clinics.