

Protect yourself this flu season

By Akilah Dressekie

Autumn not only signals the end of summer; it's also the beginning of influenza (flu) season. Because the flu virus tends to flourish in cooler, damp conditions, and with the cooler temperatures forcing people indoors, it makes the virus easier to spread. And while cases of the flu during this time of year is quite common, there could be another health alert on H1N1 (swine) flu cases similar to what was experienced in April and May.

There are many things that you can do to protect yourself and your family from getting sick.

Symptoms

The symptoms of H1N1 are usually similar to those of the seasonal flu, and include headache, chills and cough followed by fever, loss of appetite, muscle aches and fatigue, runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may occur in adults as well as in children. In more severe cases, or in people with chronic conditions, complications such as pneumonia can develop.

Even if you have an important meeting that day, if you start to feel these symptoms, this is the time to call in sick.

"Because the flu thrives in a community setting, if one person has it, it's more than likely to spread. If you experience flu-like symptoms, it's very important to stay home and rest," says Tricia Root, director, infection prevention and control at Rouge Valley Health System (RVHS).

When to see a physician

"It's important to remind people not to panic. Most people who get the flu are able to fight it off on their own as the virus runs its course," says Dr. Abdelbaset Belhaj, infectious diseases consultant and medical director of the infection prevention and control team at RVHS.

However, he adds that if these symptoms persist for more than five to six days or worsen, see your family physician or go to a walk-in clinic. Go to emergency if your symptoms are more severe.

“Go to the hospital if you have more serious symptoms, such as a severe shortness of breath, a persistent high fever, a decreased level of consciousness, or seizures. This could indicate something more serious,” adds Dr. Belhaj.

What you can do to prevent the spread of the flu and the H1N1 (swine) flu virus

There are many things you can do to help protect yourself and others from getting this flu this season.

Wash your hands

When done correctly, hand-washing can be one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of communicable diseases like the flu. Wash your hands several times a day with warm water and liquid soap, especially after coughing or sneezing. If you're unable to wash your hands, use hand sanitizer.

Cover your cough or sneeze

Always cough or sneeze into your sleeve, arm, or a tissue, and not into your hand.

Get the flu shot

“Getting the flu shot is a great way to protect yourself from the flu, and those around you. Anyone can get the flu shot. We also recommend that children, pregnant women and those with pre-existing medical conditions get the flu shot,” said Dr. Belhaj.

Flu vaccinations are available for free each fall, and can be very effective in helping to prevent the seasonal flu. Flu shots are expected to be made available in September, while vaccinations against the H1N1 virus are expected to be available later this fall. You can and should receive both vaccinations.

Stay home when sick

When you are feeling sick, call in sick to work and avoid large crowds, as this can cause the virus to spread. Be sure to stay at home and get some rest.

Keep common surfaces clean

Use a disinfectant to clean surfaces around a person who is sick with the influenza. And don't share personal items or drinks.

For more information on the H1N1 flu virus how to protect yourself, visit

www.rougevalley.ca/h1n1.