Influenza, more commonly known as the flu, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by flu viruses that infect the nose, throat and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness and at times can lead to death. The flu is very unpredictable and its severity can vary widely from season to season and person to person.

Signs and Symptoms

Individuals who contract the flu experience a wide range of signs and symptoms. These symptoms can include the following:

- Fever/chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle and/or body aches
- Headache
- Fatigue

*Please note that not everyone who contracts the flu will have a fever.

How the Flu Spreads

It is believed that most cases of the flu virus are contracted through the spreading of droplets made when people with the flu cough, sneeze or talk. Coming in contact with the flu virus by touching a surface or object that the flu virus lives on is also a possibility. An individual can spread the flu virus before he/she feels any symptoms themselves, as well as when they are sick. An adult that comes down with the flu can infect others 1 day before he/she develops symptoms and up to 7 days after becoming sick. Children and those with a weakened immune system may have a longer time frame of when they are contagious.

Prevention

One of the best ways to prevent yourself from getting the flu is to get vaccinated each year before flu season. Flu season can start as early as October and will reach its peak sometime in January or later. The flu vaccine can take about two weeks for the vaccination to become effective, so getting your vaccine before the spread of influenza begins is best. Other ways to prevent the illness is to be sure to wash your hands often and to stay clear of those individuals who are sick.

Treatment

It is important to remember that the flu is caused by a virus, not a bacteria, and therefore antibiotics do not help treat the flu. Antibiotics may be used in rare instances where a person has had the flu that has progressed into a bacterial illness, but again are NOT effective against the flu itself. Although there is no cure for the flu, the following medications can help treat some of the symptoms of the flu:

- Pain reliever/fever reducers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be used to treat fever/chills, headache, sore throat, or body aches.
- Over-the-counter cough suppressants (e.g. dextromethorphan) and expectorants (e.g. guaifenesin) can help treat coughs and loosen mucus.
Influenza

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- Decongestants (e.g. pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine) can help with sinus congestion and stuffy nose.
- Antiviral medications such as Tamiflu and Relenza may help to shorten the duration of symptoms in patients with confirmed flu. These medications require a prescription and work best when started within 2 days of getting sick. Sometimes these medications are used in people who have been exposed to the flu in an effort to prevent them from becoming sick.

Alternative Ways to Treat the Flu

As per flu.gov, you can treat flu symptoms without medication by:

- Getting plenty of rest
- Stay cool by placing cold compresses on your forehead, arms and legs
- Gargling salt water
- Drinking plenty of fluids
- Sleeping with a humidifier in the room to make breathing easier

Did you know that October is Breast Cancer Awareness

Breast Cancer is the second most common form of cancer in American women. Though some people have no symptoms at all, some may see a change in the size or shape of his/her breast, experience pain or find a lump in the breast or underarm. If you have any of these signs be sure to consult your physician and schedule a mammogram. Those who are healthy and between the ages of 50 and 74 should be screened every two years.

Quick Facts about Breast Cancer

Each year in the United States...

- More than 200,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer and more than 40,000 die from the disease
- More than 2,000 men get breast cancer and about 400 die from the disease
- Most breast cancers are found in women 50 years old or older
- 11% of all new cases of breast cancer are found in women younger than 45 years of age