

Eschew the Flu

It's a tough battle, but with the right weapons it can be won.

BY KARA DOUGLASS THOM



The influenza virus can be mild enough to be confused with the common cold or severe enough to be deadly. Each year complications from the illness account for some 200,000 hospitalizations and approximately 36,000 deaths—mostly in people with compromised immune systems. But even for us healthy folk, the flu can be a bugger, eating up sick days at work not to mention the time away from the ski slopes or running trails.

The flu causes a combination of symptoms, typically congestion, coughing, and sore throat. Sound familiar? Discerning the flu over a cold is a matter of degree—literally.

“With a common cold, a person rarely runs a fever, or it tends to be low grade, below 101 degrees,” says Tom Skinner, a spokesperson for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “The flu presents with a rapid onset of mid- to high-grade fever [above 101 degrees], accompanied by body aches and pains. Many people describe it as feeling like they’ve been hit by a car.” As if that weren’t enough, sometimes—especially in its younger victims—diarrhea or vomiting occur.

Influenza isn’t a single virus but a large family of bugs that are constantly mutating. Each correlating virus is referred to as a strain. Although similar enough to produce the same types of symptoms, each strain is different enough to go unrecognized by our immune systems. This means if you’ve had the flu before, you’re still vulnerable to another bout. Typically, only one or two strains reach epidemic proportions each year; and if the World Health Organization has guessed right (by tracking viruses through a global surveillance network), those strains are included in the yearly vaccine.

Flu season lasts from October to March, peaking between December and February. If you plan to get a flu shot, aim for October to mid-November. “But,” recommends Skinner, “if you’re at the doctor in September and have access to it, get it.” Likewise, if it’s January and your doctor still has flu shots available, it could spare you a sickly spring.

“In terms of prevention, the flu vaccine offers the best form of protection,” says Dr. Randy Horwitz, medical director of the University of Arizona’s Program in Integrative Medicine.

But flu vaccine is made in limited doses, so not every person can or should have one. And whether a flu vaccine is all it’s cracked up to be in terms of preventing death is still up for debate. Until recently, it appeared that flu vaccines reduced death rates among more-vulnerable seniors; a study published in the February 2005 issue of *Archives of Internal Medicine*, however, discovered differently—that death rates did not go down based on immunizations. Still, if you’re healthy and not likely to die from the flu anyway, getting immunized could spare you two weeks of suffering and prevent you from spreading it to friends and family.

ABCS OF HAND WASHING

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that human influenza viruses can survive on hard surfaces for up to eight hours. These surfaces—such as bathroom sinks, shopping carts, hand rails, door knobs, and elevator buttons—can be the source of illness.

Frequent hand washing with soap and water (for at least 15 seconds, or as long as it takes to sing the ABCs) can prevent transmitting the virus. Wash your hands after using the restroom and before eating—even snacks.

Hand washing is especially important after sneezing, coughing, or blowing your nose. Other high-priority hand-washing opportunities include after grocery shopping, a workout at the gym, or day at the office. If you can’t get to a sink, carry an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. And if you have children, keep their hands clean, too, and have them use a hand sanitizer before and after going to daycare centers, play groups, or other public places.



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If you have faith in your immune system without a vaccine, you can protect yourself with obvious but often neglected behaviors such as repeated hand washing, covering up coughs and sneezes, avoiding sick people, and keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth.

If you do get sick, stay away from the office, climbing gym, coffee shop, and other places where you could inadvertently leave the nasal and saliva droplets that carry the virus.

If you notice the illness early enough, a prescription antiviral medication might lessen the degree of your symptoms. “By the time most people realize they’re sick,” says Skinner, “it’s past the 24- to 72-hour window when an antiviral is effective. Short of taking antivirals, you’re basically left with rest, fluid, and treating the symptoms with over-the-counter remedies.”

Natural remedies might also help prevent the flu or treat its symptoms. “Astragalus can be used every day to boost immune cells,” says Dr. Horwitz. “Echinacea is a short-term booster. Use it in bursts of six to eight weeks, with a few weeks off in between, during the flu season or if you’ve been exposed to the virus.” He recommends elderberry and garlic for their antiviral properties. “Chew down on a clove of garlic a couple of times a day at the first sign of symptoms.” Chewing it in the mouth is essential because the health-boosting enzymes decompose rapidly when exposed to air, explains Dr. Horwitz. “Of course this also provides a natural barrier to getting sick because people tend to stay away from you.”

Although studies flip-flop regarding whether or not vitamin C can prevent the flu, it may help reduce symptoms due to its antihistamine-like effect that decreases swelling and secretions (think about your puffy eyes and runny nose). Another possible supplement is lactobacillus, found in yogurt, kefir, and certain milk products. A probiotic, lactobacillus helps restore “good bacteria” in the body and ward off infection. Zinc can also boost the immune system and reduce the length and the severity of symptoms.

If you go the way of natural or homeopathic remedies, it’s helpful to consult a trained naturopath or homeopath—and it’s always a good idea to run it by your healthcare provider, especially if you have an autoimmune condition or take drugs to regulate the immune system.

Dr. Horwitz also urges people to be mindful of factors that have a positive impact on their immune systems, such as exercise, good nutrition, and plenty of sleep. “It’s counterproductive to pop forty pills a day to stay healthy only to burn the candle at both ends,” he says. [WU](#)

VIRAL LOADING

Not everyone needs the influenza vaccine to get through flu season safely. If you’re not at high risk for complications and are healthy, your immune system may be able to fight off the illness or avoid it altogether. How do you decide if you need the vaccine?

You have a compromised immune system. Anyone with a chronic illness, such as asthma or diabetes, can be susceptible to severe complications from flu.

You are “of age.” The CDC recommends that children ages six months to two years get the shot as well as seniors older than 65.

You are a caregiver for either of the above. Whether in the home or working in the medical field, you should avoid passing on the virus.

You are pregnant or nursing. A severe illness could restrict fetal growth; by getting the vaccine, both you and your baby can share your immunity through the placenta or breast milk.

You are a “people person.” If you work in a high-traffic occupation, you might need the armor of a flu shot.