

INFLUENZA



Influenza is a disease caused by the influenza virus. There is influenza A and influenza B. A lot of people say they have the flu when they don't actually have either of these two viruses. We also get distorted data on the flu in the press- only 1348 deaths per year were reported from NCHS (average in years 1979-2002) yet we get tons of articles claiming 36,000 deaths per year. An article: *BMJ 2005;331:1412* is interesting reading.

H1N1 was a strain similar to the 1918 epidemic that killed 5% of the world's population. Fortunately it was not as deadly as we feared it would be. Some of the cases are actually quite mild.

Influenza typically begins with a fever and shaking chills. Rather suddenly you begin to have muscle aches and joint aches, pretty bad headaches and have a terrible time falling asleep with this. This usually occurs 1-5 days after being exposed to someone with the flu. If you have been exposed to someone with the definitely confirmed flu within the last 24 hours or so, you can take Tamiflu as a preventive medication.

After the fever and shaking chills, which also might be accompanied by vomiting or GI discomfort, a dry cough and nasal discharge begins. As time goes on, this seems to settle more in the chest. The virus usually multiplies in the cells that line the sinuses and lungs, which kills that lining. Hence, the darkness of the secretions is frequently from those dead cells or even blood. Some people get burning in their chest at this stage. This stage can go on for 1-2 or even more weeks.

There has been a flu vaccine for many years. The funny thing about this shot is that it will only protect you for one year's strain at a time. The flu changes its outside "coat" and scientists need to figure out what that coat will look like to make the proper shot for the coming flu season. So many people get a flu-like illness or even influenza A even when they were vaccinated that year. This doesn't surprise us. But what surprises us is that the flu shot seems to decrease deaths from all causes (even deaths not attributable to the flu)!!

H1N1 was just another strain we thought might have horrible pathogenicity. For instance, in 1918 young people were more frequently killed by the virus than old people (and very young) as is usually the case with the flu. They call this "cytokine storm" where a stronger person's stronger immune system puts up a more vigorous fight and the fighting is what damages organs. In the 2009-10 H1N1 flu, for the most part the virus was as mild as a regular flu, and deaths were most typical in the older more debilitated patients as is common with the flu. Those in the vigorously healthy age group who died tended to have more strep pneumonia as a contributing factor.

Just remember, the flu shot only protects against influenza A and there are still a lot of other really bad viruses that look similar that you won't be protected from. 31-41% of kids aged 5 to 19 get influenza when it hits an area! The CDC thought if we immunized all kids we could avoid spreading the natural disease. That's a lofty goal when the virus changes every year and when so many other illnesses mimic the flu.

The most serious complication of the flu is pneumonia afterwards. That is why we frequently give antibiotics when you get to the stage of coughing if secretions are thick and copious. Serious breathing problems should always be brought to the attention of this office, as should be a persistently high fever or a change in mental status.

CARING FAMILY, SC 815-459-2200

Todd S Giese, MD, Racquel N Ramirez, MD, George B Gancayco, MD, Jamie
TM Gancayco, MD & Lauren K Mielke, FNP Family Nurse Practitioner.
Visit our website at: www.mycaringfamily.com

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