

Lifewire: Best way to avoid the flu is to follow basic hygiene rules

by Ven_Griva

Increasingly, medical professionals are viewing October as the start of cold and flu season. The first full month of fall is a good time to remind ourselves of some basic hygiene rules that can help reduce the risk of coming down with a respiratory virus.

Respiratory viruses are common worldwide. Although the majority of people who come down with one experience mild symptoms, respiratory viruses cause illness and even death in certain groups or populations. Especially at risk are young children, the elderly and those with chronic illnesses.

Viruses are easily transmitted, especially in areas where there are large numbers of people in close proximity, such as on public transportation, school or busy shopping centers.

As global travel becomes ever easier and more accessible, air travel can significantly accelerate the spread of infections such as influenza. Reducing the spread of droplets carrying the virus by covering the mouth and nose is an effective preventive measure.

"It is alarming how many people do not follow basic hygiene rules like washing their hands after going to the toilet or covering their mouths when they cough or sneeze," said Dr. Vivienne Nathanson, the head of science and ethics at the British Medical Association. "It is worrying that if children don't see their parents following these simple rules, it is unlikely they will get into the habit of following them either."

In the event of a major influenza outbreak, some established measures will be important factors in reducing the spread of infection. To reduce your risk of coming down with a cold or flu, the British Medical Association provides the following checklist:

- Wash hands: Do this especially before and after preparing food and after using the toilet.

- Alcohol gel: This product can be used as an alternative to hand washing with soap and water.

- Clean surfaces thoroughly: Viruses can survive for up to two days or more, so it is important to clean countertops, desktops, keyboards, handrails and doorknobs.

- Use disposable tissues: Disposal of potentially infectious materials is one way to reduce the risk of spreading infection.

- Cover your mouth: Droplets expelled by coughing and sneezing that come into contact with another person can transmit infection. Make sure you wash your hands after covering your mouth with your hand when coughing and sneezing.

FLU VACCINE

Only a fraction of the people who need flu shots the most are getting them - including just one in five babies and toddlers, say federal health officials.

The government sounded the alarm Sept. 19, worried that a string of mild flu seasons and the vaccine confusion of recent years are deterring people from this simple lifesaver. Health care officials hope to reverse this trend as a record vaccine supply heads out this fall.

People older than 64 are most likely to get vaccinated - 69 percent during the 2005-2006 flu season, the latest count available. That drops to just over a third of 50- to 64-year-olds, said the report. Just 30 percent of younger adults who are at high risk because of underlying illnesses got vaccinated, the CDC found.

Manufacturers expect to ship more than 130 million doses of flu vaccine in coming months. So, the CDC recommends that anyone who wants to avoid the flu should seek out this ample supply, especially those at high risk of flu complications because of age or underlying illness.

While a flu shot is no guarantee that you will not come down with a virus, it will reduce the length and severity of the illness, say the experts at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

While an early shot is good, don't give up if you can't schedule one in the fall - winter's not too late for protection, stressed Julie Gerberding, of the CDC.

"We need to rethink the influenza immunization season and encourage vaccination throughout the fall and winter for anyone wishing to be protected," she said.

According to the CDC, influenza kills about 36,000 Americans a year, and leads to about 200,000 hospitalizations.

People who should get vaccinated each year include:

- Children aged 6 months to 5 years.

- Pregnant women.

- People 50 years of age and older.

- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions.

- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu.

- Health care workers.

For more information, visit the CDC Web site (www.cdc.gov/flu).

E-mail Ven Griva at ven.griva@copleynews.com or write to P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112.

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