



## **Influenza and the Common Cold**

By Gerard L. Guillory, M.D.

Each year, as autumn gets under way, my office begins receiving calls about colds and influenza. Although there is no “cure” for these common maladies, there are steps you can take to prevent them and, if you become sick, steps you can take to treat the symptoms.

### **Influenza**

Influenza is an acute viral infection of the respiratory tract that usually spreads through a community during the winter months. Symptoms appear abruptly and can include fever, chills, dry cough, nasal stuffiness, runny nose, intense muscle ache, sore throat, headache and weakness. The hallmark of influenza is the sudden onset of headache and intense muscular aching associated with high fever and respiratory symptoms. Symptoms might persist for a week or two. The “flu syndrome” is caused by the type A or type B influenza virus.

**Spread of infection:** Influenza spreads when infected droplets are discharged through the air by an infected person. This can occur when the infected person is speaking, coughing or sneezing. The droplets are then inhaled by uninfected people.

**Prevention:** Some strains of influenza can be prevented by immunization. Other preventive measures include avoiding crowds during an epidemic of influenza and avoiding inhaling infected droplets (for example, from others’ sneezing and coughing).

### **Common cold**

Rhinovirus and coronal viruses are the viral agents that most frequently cause the common cold, which is often confused with the flu. More than 200 viruses can cause colds, so the symptoms also tend to vary widely. The common cold differs from influenza in that the symptoms are less severe and are characterized by the more gradual onset of runny nose, fatigue, sneezing, scratchy throat, cough, hoarseness and, usually, low-grade fever. Symptoms usually last one to two weeks.

### **Spread of infection**

A common misconception is that colds occur during cold weather. However, the weather isn’t the issue. Colds spread as children return to school and begin to pass various respiratory infections to one another. The children then bring the infections home to their parents, who bring these to the workplace, where the infections are passed on to others.

**Spread of infection:** While influenza spreads through infected droplets in the air, transmission of the cold usually occurs through hand-to-hand contact.

**Prevention:** If you are exposed to someone who has a common cold, avoid hand-to-hand contact and wash your hands frequently.

### **Treatment of symptoms**

General treatment measures for respiratory-tract infections tend to focus on the symptoms, not the cause, and include bed rest, increased fluid intake, lozenges for sore throat, and acetaminophen (Tylenol) for fever and aches. Topical decongestants can be helpful in treating bothersome sniffles but shouldn't be used for more than three or four consecutive days. A wide variety of cough suppressants is available for treating the cough. In addition, some over-the-counter natural remedies can help boost the immune system and treat respiratory symptoms. Acute Immunity (manufactured by New Mark) is one such product that I have found helpful.

### **Immunization**

Flu shots are usually given in the early fall, starting in September. The viruses contained in the vaccine change each year, based on international surveillance and on scientists' estimations about which types and strains of viruses will circulate in a given year.

In general, anyone who wants to reduce the chances of getting the flu can be vaccinated. There are certain high-risk groups for whom vaccination is recommended annually. These include pregnant women and people age 50 years and older. Others who should consider receiving flu shots are those who have certain chronic medical conditions, live in a nursing home or other long-term care facility, work in healthcare or have household contact with persons at higher risk for complications from influenza. Essential personnel such as policeman and fireman also should consider receiving annual vaccinations.

You should *not* have the flu vaccine if you have had a reaction in the past or if you have a severe allergy to chicken eggs. Postpone the immunization if you are experiencing a moderate to severe illness with fever. Although the flu shot is generally well tolerated, you might develop some soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot was given. You might also experience low-grade fever and muscle aches.

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