April 19, 2011

Influenza (Seasonal) Fact Sheet

1. **What is Influenza (Flu)? -** The Flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. There are two types of flu virus that cause seasonal influenza in humans, influenza A and B. Both viruses are constantly mutating and changing as they spread through a population. This is the reason new strains of Flu appear almost every year. Sometimes a major genetic change occurs that then causes a global disease outbreak, or pandemic. In the United States, the Flu season can range from November to as late as May. In the recent past, Flu activity has most commonly peaked in February.

2. **What are the symptoms of Flu? –** The incubation period for the flu is 1 to 5 days although onset of symptoms most commonly starts within 48 hours of exposure. Symptom onset is usually abrupt. The duration of illness is typically 3 to 7 days. Flu symptoms include:

   a. Fever (usually high),*

   b. Dry cough,

   c. Sore throat,

   d. Fatigue (very tired),

   e. Headache,

   f. Runny or stuffy nose, and

   g. Muscle or body aches

**It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever or all of these symptoms.*

3. **How does Flu spread? -** Flu viruses spread from person to person through unprotected coughing or sneezing. Sometimes people may become infected by touching surfaces contaminated with Flu viruses and then touching their mouth or nose. Some of the people who become infected with Flu virus do not get sick, but still spread the virus to others. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five days after becoming sick. Infected children may pass the virus for longer than seven days. People can also pass on the before they know they are sick, as well as while sick.

4. **Who gets the Flu? -** Anyone can get the Flu, and serious problems can happen at any age. Flu is most common in children while complications are most common among the elderly. Flu Seasons are unpredictable and can be severe. Over a period of 30 years, between 1976 and 2006, estimates of flu-associated deaths ranged from a low of 3,000 to a high of 49,000.

5. **How can Flu be best prevented? -** The single best way to prevent influenza is to get a Flu vaccination each year. About two weeks after vaccination, protective antibodies develop. There are two types of flu vaccines:

    a. The Flu shot is an inactivated vaccine (containing only killed virus) that is injected with a needle. The Flu shot is approved for use in people six months of age and older, including healthy people, people with chronic medical conditions and pregnant women.

    b. The nasal-spray flu vaccine is a vaccine made with live, weakened flu virus that does not cause illness (sometimes called LAIV for "Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine"). LAIV is approved for use in health people two to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

6. **Who should get vaccinated? -** On February 24, 2010 vaccine experts determined that everyone six months and older should get a flu vaccine each year starting with the 2010-11 influenza season. The "universal" flu vaccination program in the United States was expanded to protect more people against Flu. While everyone should get a Flu vaccine each season, it's especially important that people that are at high risk of having serious complications or live with or care for people at high risk for developing flu-related complications get vaccinated...

7. **What are the possible medical complications of the Flu? -** People age 65 years and older, of any age with chronic medical conditions, and young children are more likely to get complications from the Flu. Pregnancy also increases the chance for flu complications. Pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections are three of the more common Flu complications. The Flu can make chronic health problems worse: e.g. people with asthma may experience more attacks, and people with chronic congestive heart failure may have a worsening of their condition, and diabetes may be more difficult to control.

8. **Who is at high risk for developing Flu-related complications? –**

    a. Children younger than five, but especially children younger than two years of age,

    b. Adults 65 years of age and older,

    c. Pregnant women,

    d. People who have serious medical conditions including:

        (1) Asthma,

        (2) Neurological and neuro-developmental conditions,

        (3) Chronic lung disease,

        (4) Heart disease,

        (5) Blood disorders,

(6) Endocrine, Kidney, Metabolic and Liver disorders,

(7) A weakened immune system due to disease or medication,

(8) People younger than 19 years of age receiving long-term Aspirin therapy*, and

(9) People who are morbidly obese.

*Reye syndrome is a rare nervous system complication of influenza linked to aspirin use in children. **Never** give aspirin to children or teenagers who have Flu-like symptoms – and particularly fever – without first speaking to your doctor. Children or teenagers with the flu should get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids, and take medicines that contain no aspirin to relieve their symptoms.

9. **Who else should get vaccinated? –**

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

   b. People who live with or care for those at high risk for Flu complications including:

      (1) Health Care Workers,

      (2) Household contacts of persons at high risk for Flu complications,

      (3) Household contacts and caregivers of children younger than 5 years of age with particular emphasis on vaccinating contacts of children younger than 6 months of age because children younger than 6 months are too young to get vaccinated and therefore, at high risk

10. **How is the Flu diagnosed? –** Influenza may be clinically similar to disease caused by other respiratory viruses, such as the common cold, croup, bronchiolitis, viral pneumonia and undifferentiated acute respiratory disease. During the Flu season, recognition is commonly made by linkage to other known cases. Health care providers can obtain samples from the nose and throat and test them for flu virus. Less commonly, blood samples are obtained.

11. **How is the Flu treated?**

    a. Rest,

    b. Drink plenty of liquids,

    c. Avoid using alcohol and tobacco,

    d. Take Over-the-Counter medications to relieve the symptoms of Flu,

e. Influenza is caused by a virus, so antibiotics (like penicillin) don't work against Flu, however, bacterial infections can occur at the same time or follow an influenza infection. Only take antibiotics if prescribed by your health care provider.

f. Your doctor may recommend use of an antiviral medication, and

g. Do not return to work or school until you have not had a fever for 24 hours, without the use of any fever reducing medication.

12. **What are the antiviral medications mentioned above? -** Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines that fight against the flu in your body. After vaccination, antiviral drugs are a second line of defense against the flu. Antiviral drugs are not sold over-the-counter and are different from antibiotics. You can only get them if you have a prescription from your doctor or health care provider. Two flu medications are currently recommended for use in the United States: Oseltamivir (brand name Tamiflu®) and Zanamivir (brand name Relenza®). Studies have shown that flu antiviral drugs work best for treatment of they are started within 2 days of getting sick. There may still be benefit in treating people with antiviral drugs even after 2 days have gone by, especially if the sick person has a greater chance of serious flu complications or is in the hospital because of flu.

13. **What can I do to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses?**

    a. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue away after you use it. If you don't have a tissue cough or sneeze into your sleeve or elbow, not your hands.

    b. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds**,** especially after you cough or sneeze. If you are not near water, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.

    c. Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.

    d. If you get the Flu, stay home from work, school, and social gatherings. In this way you will help prevent others from catching your illness. Do not return to work or school until you have not had a fever for 24 hours, without the use of any fever reducing medication.

    e. Try not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs often spread this way.

14. **For more information about Influenza**: http://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm

    This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information.