

OLDER AND WISER: Don't get sick stressing over flu season

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file photo Dan Toulgoet, Vancouver Courier
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At this time of year, when you feel that scratchy throat you know what's coming next.

But since the flu season generally occurs in the fall, winter, and early spring, getting the flu might be expected especially if you don't prepare yourself. If you get the flu you could get a mild case where the symptoms will disappear quickly, or you can get very sick with serious complications.

People at higher risk for contracting the flu are seniors 65 and older.

The flu is an infection of the upper airway caused by an influenza virus. Flu symptoms appear one to four days after exposure to the virus. Usually they include the sudden appearance of a fever, cough, muscle aches and pains. But other symptoms include headache, chills, fatigue, loss of appetite, sore throat and a runny or stuffy nose.

The problem that occurs with some people who contract the flu is that it can lead to other more serious illnesses, it can be easily spread to other people (those with compromised immune systems, elderly people, pregnant women, and those who don't get vaccinated) and it can put you out of commission for a week or more. Nobody wants to get the flu when you're all set to enjoy turkey dinner at your daughter's house, or you've just joined a class at Elder College, or you've got that great trip to Hawaii planned.

Unfortunately, if you are an older adult and have risk factors for heart disease (high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes) you could be at greater risk for a heart attack.

In an NPR article, Dr. Jeff Kwong, an epidemiologist and family physician with the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences and Public Health Ontario, states in a study that: “You’re six times more likely to have a heart attack during the week after being diagnosed with influenza, compared to the year before or after the infection.”

Seniors are also at risk for getting viral or bacterial pneumonia which is an infection of the lungs.

Most prescribed advice suggests that you can reduce the risk of catching influenza or spreading it to others by washing your hands regularly, eating well, exercising, and getting the influenza vaccine.

Other things you can do include promptly disposing of used tissues in the waste basket or garbage, coughing and sneezing into your shirt sleeve rather than your hands, staying home when you are ill, keeping your hands away from your face, and keeping common surface areas like doorknobs, light switches and keyboards clean and disinfected.

Many health care professionals recommend a flu shot as the best means of preventing the flu. It can also be argued that by not getting the flu shot, in addition to you getting sick and possibly negatively affecting your immune system, you’re increasing the chances of others getting sick as well. The more people that are protected against the flu, the less the virus can spread. Some people, such as babies under the age of six months, can’t be vaccinated. To minimize their risk of getting sick, you can do your part by getting the flu shot. You won’t just be protecting yourself, but you’ll also help protect others around you.

The BC Centre for Disease Control states: “the Influenza vaccine, also known as the ‘flu shot,’ may help prevent you from getting sick with influenza or from spreading it to others.” The centre suggests that October and early November are the best times to get a flu shot and it is best to try to get it by the end of November to allow your body enough time – about two weeks – to build immunity before the influenza season starts. But the vaccine may be given at any time during the season.

An article on McMaster Optimal Aging Portal 2018 states that: “Canadian targets aim for 80 per cent of older adults to get the flu shot to help prevent the spread of infection, however, every year at least 30 per cent of older adults in Canada – including those in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities – are not vaccinated.”

Although Vancouver Coastal Health is not undertaking flu clinics at seniors’ centres this year, there are places a senior can go for a free shot. These include most pharmacies, your doctor, some grocery stores and some North Shore organizations. Most flu shots are free for seniors, but for a higher dosage shot that some advisors recommend for seniors, there is a cost and these shots must be done through a pharmacy or at your doctor’s office.

Getting a flu shot helps us all in the community stay healthy. Let’s do our part.

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