Live Healthy and Be Well!

"Give thanks but avoid the flu!"

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This is the time of year that some talk about the flu is appropriate. While we have not been seeing a lot of cases yet, some of you may have had some symptoms, and hopefully many of you have gotten your "flu shot" for this year. *Influenza*, commonly known as the flu, is a viral illness that starts in birds and mammals and ends up getting transmitted to humans. Although it is often confused with other flu-like illnesses, such as the common cold, influenza itself is a more severe disease caused by a different type of virus. The flu is mainly a respiratory illness, as that is how it gets into your system (by breathing it in), but may initially show up with other symptoms besides wheezing and cough. Although we often think that the flu is a rather minor illness, we are wise to remember that Influenza is responsible for millions of deaths worldwide over the years, and has been the cause of some major epidemics in the not too distant past (WWI era).

Typically, influenza is transmitted through the air by coughs or sneezes, creating aerosols containing the virus. Influenza can also be transmitted by direct contact with bird droppings or nasal secretions from infected persons, or through contact with contaminated surfaces. Influenza viruses can be inactivated by sunlight, disinfectants and detergents. As the virus can be inactivated by soap, frequent hand washing reduces the risk of infection.

Often, new influenza strains appear when an existing flu virus spreads to humans from another animal species, or when an existing human strain mutates from a virus that usually infects birds or pigs. A few years ago, a bird strain named H5N1 raised the concern of a new influenza pandemic after it emerged in Asia in the 1990s. In April 2009, a novel flu strain evolved that combined genes from human, pig, and bird flu. Initially dubbed "swine flu" and also known as influenza A/H1N1, it emerged in Mexico, the United States, and several other nations. The World Health Organization's declaration of a pandemic level 6 was an indication of spread, not severity, the strain actually having a lower mortality rate than common flu outbreaks.

Approximately 1/3 of people who get the flu have no symptoms at all. Those who do experience a myriad of symptoms noted in the illustration. There is a good test available that is very sensitive in detecting the flu virus, and it involves a swab of your nasal passages. It can usually be run in about 20 minutes, and if you do test positive, appropriate treatment or symptom management can be instituted. A common ailment that seems to be highlighted in the flu versus other viral illnesses is "body and muscle aches." Some folks may have this to such a degree, and feel so ill, that they just want to stay in bed until they feel better. As the flu is a virus, antibiotics typically will not affect the course. You may get better in a couple of days, but would have anyway if you had just rested, increased your fluid intake, and treated the symptoms – let the flu run its course. There is a treatment known as "Tamiflu" that is thought to shorten the course of the illness or make it less severe. Although it is widely used with varying anecdotal results – there is a shortage of published, properly designed studies of this medicine to "prove" its effectiveness.

The flu vaccine is something that people seem to feel strongly about. Either they are very much in favor of it or hate it! Some people say it gave them the flu, or others say it makes them feel bad, and don't want to take it. The flu shot we have available each fall is usually a "trivalent" vaccine, meaning that it is designed to protect against the three most likely strains of that season. Sometimes they get it right, and sometimes it misses the mark. The vaccine carries no risk of infecting anyone, and is usually very benign and non-reactive. Before getting the shot, you will be asked if you have an allergy to eggs, or thimerisol. Eggs are used to incubate the virus to make the vaccine, and the other is a mercury-like compound used as a "carrier" for the injection. Some people may experience a mild temp increase after getting their flu shot – a dose of Tylenol or Ibuprofen before your vaccination will help with this situation. We do recommend the flu vaccine each year, especially for older folks, people prone to pneumonia, or those with COPD or other chronic respiratory disease. While it cannot be said to be 100% effective – there is evidence to believe that it does help prevent the flu, or lessen the symptoms and length of illness if you do happen to get it in spite of the shot.

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call us at 706-782-3572, and we will be sure to consider your input. This and previous articles can be now be found on the web at www.rabundoctor.com in an archived format. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Until next month, live healthy and be well!