

SEASONAL FLU

Introduction

Seasonal flu which is also known as influenza is a very infectious disease that usually happens in the winter months due to a virus. It occurs every year, and flu viruses are constantly changing.

Antibodies are type of proteins that fight the germs that have come into your body. They are produced by your body when you get the flu virus to protect itself. These antibodies are able to remember the same flu virus and fight it when it enters your body again.

Unfortunately, flu viruses are frequently able to change (mutate) into a different type/version every year. This means that if you were to get a different type/version of the flu virus your body would not recognise it and would get the flu infection. This is the reason why people get repeated flu infections.

There are different types of flu; the three main types are:

- Type A - occurs every two to three years and is more serious than type B. The virus is likely to mutate to a different version to which people have no resistance.
- Type B - generally causes a less severe illness and is responsible for smaller outbreaks. If you have been infected with this, your immunity to further flu B infections will last for many years. Flu B mainly affects young children.
- Type C - usually causes a mild illness similar to the common cold.

Interesting Fact: **Did you know?**

In the UK, about 600 people a year die from seasonal flu. This rises to around 13,000 during an epidemic.

Interesting Fact: **Did you know?**

The number of people who consult their GP with flu-like symptoms varies from year to year, but is usually 1 in 4 people. This is in addition to the many people with flu who do not see their GP.

How infection is spread

The virus can be spread via small droplets from a cough or sneeze through the nose and mouth. These droplets can actually survive for few hours on surfaces such as tissues and on hands. So, if someone else touches this surface they can become infected. The droplets can travel in air and spread to others by them breathing it in, thus it is important to cover your nose or mouth when coughing or sneezing.

Symptoms

The seasonal flu symptoms include:

- Fever
- Dry, chesty cough

- Tiredness
- Headache
- Chills
- Runny or blocked nose
- Sneezing
- Sore throat
- Shortness of breath or cough
- Loss of appetite
- Aching muscles/limb or joint pain
- Diarrhoea or stomach upset
- Difficulty sleeping

There are some people that are more likely of becoming ill (although everyone is at risk). These include:

- Very young or very old
- People with existing medical conditions such as asthma or diabetes
- People who are immunosuppressed (their immune system is 'dampened' down) by certain medications

Flu virus in some children with specific long-term health conditions (such as chronic [long term] heart and liver problems, sickle cell disorder and others) can be more serious.

A serious complication associated with flu is bacterial chest infection potentially developing into pneumonia. Some other rare complications include:

- Tonsillitis
- Otitis media (a build-up of fluid in the ear)
- Septic shock (infection of the blood that causes a severe drop in blood pressure)
- Meningitis (infection in the brain and spinal cord)
- Encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

Diagnosis

Diagnosis for seasonal flu is made from the symptoms as the symptoms of flu are very similar to many other viral infections. In some circumstances your doctor may send a throat swab or blood to the laboratory to test for flu virus.

Treatment

Most people with seasonal flu can be treated with paracetamol and paracetamol-based cold remedies can also be used to ease some of the flu symptoms and reduce the temperature.

It is vital to ensure that anyone who gets seasonal flu should also get plenty of rest, drinking lots of fluids, and isolate themselves to prevent spreading to someone else especially from those in the high risk group. Those who are in the high risk group should visit your GP if you have flu symptoms or if the symptoms are getting worse.

Seasonal flu are viruses and therefore are not treated by antibiotics as these are used to treat bacterial infections. However antibiotics can be prescribed for some of the complications arising from flu such as chest infections or pneumonia.

Some people with seasonal flu can be treated with special medication called antiviral drugs. They reduce the length of symptoms and their severity.

Protection and prevention

People with chronic illness should consider being vaccinated each year. The seasonal flu vaccination (flu jab) varies due to the flu virus changes each year.

There are certain practices which can help reduce the spread of all viruses, including seasonal flu. These include:

- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
- Using a tissue and throwing away dirty tissues promptly and carefully. CATCH IT, BIN IT, KILL IT (DH Campaign)
- Maintenance of good hand hygiene by washing hands frequently with soap and water, use of alcohol gels to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to face or to other people
- Teach and encourage children to wash their hands thoroughly
- Clean hard surfaces (e.g. door handles) frequently using household cleaning products.

Useful links:

For further of information on seasonal flu please visit the links below:

[NHS CHOICES/ NHS direct](#)

[HPA](#)

[WHO](#)

Acknowledgements:

1. NHS Scotland, NHS wales, DHSSPS,NHS (2009). Seasonal flu. Why you should have the vaccination.
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Flu-jab/documents/Seasonal%20Flu%20Vaccination%20leaflet.pdf>
2. NHS Choices website : <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/flu/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
3. Great Ormond street Hospital for Children NHS Trust (2009). Great Ormond street Hospital for Children NHS Trust: information for families. Seasonal flu 2nd edition : http://www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/gosh_families/information_sheets/flu_seasonal/flu_seasonal_families.pdf
4. Catch it, Bin it, Kill it. DH information leaflet:
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