

November 2014 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Symptoms/Transmission/Treatment/Prevention of Seasonal Flu

Historically, influenza has been documented since early times (Egyptian/Greek/Roman). According to the World Health Organization, influenza has historically been a major threat to human health. "Every year seasonal influenza affects from 5% to 15% of the world's population and causes an estimated 250 000 to 500 000 deaths worldwide. Novel influenza A virus strains can cause sporadic pandemics, such as the 1918 "Spanish flu" that killed at least 3% of the world's population. Although recent influenza pandemics, including the A (H1N1) pandemic in 2009, have been less severe, they nevertheless serve as vivid reminders of people's vulnerability to communicable respiratory viruses." [Bulletin of the World Health Organization Volume 90, Number 4, April 2012, 245-320](#). It was estimated that the 1918 (a virulent H1N1 influenza) "killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide. The illness quickly created respiratory distress and pneumonia in its victims with a distinct peak of deaths in young adults 20–40 years of age." (<http://www.historyofinfluenza.com/spanish.aspx>)

According to CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/flu-season-2014-2015.htm>), it is not possible to predict what this flu season will be like. Flu seasons are unpredictable and the timing, severity, and length of the season usually varies from one season to another. For more information about how flu viruses change, visit [How the Flu Virus Can Change](#)(<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/viruses/change.htm>). Flu activity most commonly peaks in the U.S. between December and February, but seasonal flu activity can begin as early as October and continue to occur as late as May.

Causes of influenza (flu): The flu, a contagious upper respiratory illness, is caused by one of several flu viruses and can cause mild to severe illness. It usually comes on suddenly and may include symptoms of fever (usually high), headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches, and more likely in children, possible stomach symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. The most familiar aspect of the flu is the way it can "knock you off your feet." The fever typically tends to decline on the second or third day. Flu viruses are classified as Types A, B, and C; Type A has a number of subtypes. The viruses are frequently named after the geographical locations from which the viruses originate (e.g., Hong Kong, Russian, Asian, etc.). Individuals most vulnerable to serious effects of the flu are older adults, infants, and immune-compromised persons. (*January 2009 WWURA Health Notes*). Also, [People at risk: \[http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/high_risk.htm\]\(http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/high_risk.htm\) and \[American Indians and Alaskan Natives\]\(#\)\[1.1 MB, 2 pages\] \(\[http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/freeresources/native/protect_circle_life_factsheet.pdf\]\(http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/freeresources/native/protect_circle_life_factsheet.pdf\)\).](#)

Transmitting the flu: The main transmission way is from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes ("droplet spread"). For example, touching contaminated surfaces where people have coughed or sneezed on places such as phones, tables, money and then touching one's nose or mouth. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 days after becoming sick. Children may pass the virus for longer than seven days. (*January 2009 WWURA Health Notes*).

Treatment: Antiviral drugs are used in treating the flu. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) used against the flu. Two FDA-approved influenza antiviral drugs recommended by CDC this season are Tamiflu® (generic name oseltamivir) and Relenza® (generic name zanamivir) are not sold over-the-counter. They are available only with a prescription from a doctor or health care provider. Antiviral drugs differ from antibiotics, which fight against bacterial infections. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/antivirals/index.htm>. Information about taking care of yourself and taking care of others with flu is at this site, too.

Prevention: Medical opinion is that a flu vaccine is still the first and best way to prevent influenza. Washing hands and covering sneezes are important, too!

Is it a cold or is it influenza? In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. Colds are usually milder. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/coldflu.htm>