

Short Commentary on Cold and Flu

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Introduction

Cold, or flu, is a contagious respiratory infection caused by several flu viruses that infect the nose, throat and lungs. People infected with the seasonal flu virus feel miserable with fever, chills, muscle aches, coughing, congestion, headache and fatigue for a week or so. Most people who get the flu get better within two weeks, but some people may develop serious complications, such as pneumonia. Pandemic influenza is when a new flu virus strain occurs that can spread easily from person-to-person and the virus is one for which most people have no immunity. In each seasonal year Americans get more than 1 billion colds, and between 5 and 20 percent of Americans get flu. The two diseases have some symptoms in common, and both are caused by viruses. However, they are different conditions, and flu is more severe. Unlike the flu, colds generally don't cause serious complications, such as pneumonias, or lead to hospitalization. Even healthy people can get very sick from the flu and spread it to others. Flu viruses of this type can sicken millions around the globe. The flu can be serious or even deadly for elderly people, newborn babies, and people with certain chronic illnesses. Most people with the flu recover on their own without medical care. People with mild cases of the flu should stay home and avoid contact with others, except to get medical care. If you get the flu, your health care provider may prescribe medicine to help your body fight the infection and lessen symptoms.

Prevention

You can reduce your risk of catching a cold or the flu by washing your hands frequently, which stops the spread of germs. Eating healthy, exercising and getting enough sleep also play a part in preventing colds and the flu because they help boost your immune system. Cough and sneeze into the inside of your elbow (rather than into your hand). Clean common surfaces, such as table and counter tops, your child's toys, door handles, and bathroom facilities with anti-bacterial disinfectant. This can help stop the spread of germs. The best way to avoid getting the flu is to get the influenza vaccine. You should get the vaccine when it becomes available each fall (in October or November), but you can also get it any time throughout the flu season (into December, January and beyond). The vaccine is available by shot or by nasal spray.

Some people who get the vaccine will still get the flu, but they will usually get a milder case than people who aren't vaccinated. Vaccines work by exposing your immune system to the flu virus and your body will build up antibodies to the virus to protect you from getting the flu.

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Treatment

There's no cure for the common cold. All you can do to feel better is treat your symptoms while your body fights off the virus. For the flu, your doctor will probably recommend that you treat the symptoms until you feel better. In severe cases, your doctor may prescribe an antiviral medicine. Antiviral medicines can shorten the length of time you are sick with the flu. These medicines

come as pills, syrup or in an inhaler. No vaccine can protect you against the common cold, but vaccines can protect you against the flu. Everyone over the age of 6 months should be vaccinated against the flu each year. Vaccination is the best protection against getting flu. Prescription antiviral drugs may be used to treat the flu in people who are very ill or who are at high risk of flu complications.