3 Takeaways from This Season’s Flu Epidemic

By Ellen D. Hosafros, Director of Corporate Communications, Corporate Synergies
2/20/2018

This season’s flu epidemic is one for the books. Hospitalizations for influenza symptoms are double the number over last year and are more than in nearly a decade. Before we get to the takeaways from this year’s flu epidemic, let’s review the crisis.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that deaths from influenza and pneumonia were responsible for 1 of every 10 deaths the week before last. As of this writing, the CDC reports that 22 more children have died, bringing the total this season to 84. The death toll in the coming weeks is expected to grow even higher because flu activity is still rising across the country. Along with the pneumonia it spawns, this year’s flu epidemic may be killing 4,000 people every week.

Why did the flu hit harder this year and spawn a widespread epidemic? The winter has been particularly bitter in many regions of the U.S., including otherwise temperate locales like the Southeast. When it’s cold, people congregate indoors, and close contact spreads the flu.

Humans are mobile; people carry the flu with them when they travel on planes and public transit.

Flu spreads while we conduct our day-to-day lives by going to school, shopping malls, movie theaters, work and places of worship. Snowbirds make their annual pilgrimage from cold climates to Florida, Arizona and other warmer states. The upcoming spring break is another opportunity for the illness to spread given that this flu season could extend into May.

Now that you have some context around the flu epidemic, here are 3 takeaways:

**No. 1: There’s still time to get vaccinated.**

H3N2, one of the multiple flu strains that are circulating this year, has been downright nasty. While the flu is typically more serious in those with pre-existing conditions, otherwise healthy women, men and children have gotten very sick from H3N2. Many people have died from the flu or its complications, and it’s hitting children very hard.
The CDC reports that:

- Of the 88 children who died, half had no underlying medical conditions.
- Only 26% of those children had received the flu vaccine this season before they got sick.

Some argue that flu shots are a waste of time, especially because this year’s vaccine has been only 36% effective. That means that even if you’re vaccinated, you can still get the flu.

The CDC now estimates that the vaccine has reduced risk of having to go to the doctor due to flu by 36% overall and that it is offering substantial protection against H1N1 flu as well as moderate protection against flu B viruses. Therefore, the CDC asserts that while the vaccine doesn’t eliminate the illness, it reduces the chance of getting sick and reduces the severity of symptoms in people who do contract the flu.

“We continue to recommend the flu vaccine even though we know most flu vaccines have low effectiveness against H3N2 viruses, effectiveness against other flu viruses is better, and there is more than one flu virus circulating this season,” said the CDC’s Acting Director Dr. Anne Schuchat in a recent agency press briefing on the epidemic. “Some of the serious consequences of influenza are bacterial pneumonias,” she said. “Viral infections like flu can make people more vulnerable to secondary bacterial infections and we recommend people 65 years of age and over get vaccinated against a common pneumonia caused by pneumococcus.”

Flu shots are available through healthcare providers, drugstore chains, grocery store pharmacies, and public health clinics. See the flu vaccine finder in the resource list below.

No. 2: Practice flu infection control.

Flu infection control includes avoiding people who are sick. That’s difficult if you are caring for a sick family member or come in contact with a coworker who has the flu. Even so, you can reduce getting sick and spreading the illness by practicing flu infection control.

And that means clean hands.

The CDC states 5 steps for effective handwashing: wet, lather, scrub, rinse and dry. And yes, there is a correct way to wash hands, according to the CDC:

- Wet hands with clean, running water, turn off the tap and apply soap.

- Lather hands by rubbing them together with the soap. Be sure to lather the backs of the hands, between the fingers and under the nails.

- Scrub hands for at least 20 seconds. Need a timer? Hum the “Happy Birthday” song from beginning to end twice.
- Rinse hands well under clean, running water.
- Dry hands using a clean towel or air dry them.

Avoid touching bathroom surfaces, including faucets, counters and door handles after washing. I’m such a germophobe that I carry alcohol wet-wipes to clean airplane tray tables and armrests, restaurant tables, bathroom faucets and door handles, and other hard surfaces in public places. Or use hand sanitizer. The CDC states that a solution of 60% alcohol as the most effective in reducing flu germs on hands.

**No. 3: There have been reports of anti-viral drug shortages.**

Some health insurance carriers have jumped in to ensure sick people have access to anti-viral medications, such as brand Tamiflu, without paying higher copays for the brand-name drug. In the past few weeks we’ve circulated updates to our employee benefit clients when their insurance carriers have waived the higher copay for brand Tamiflu. This action helps address the shortage of the lower-cost generic version of Tamiflu.

The flu is scary, and I hope you and your family get through the season unscathed. Now that I’m finished writing this article, I’m going to clean my keyboard with an alcohol wipe.

---

1 Washington Post, “This Flu Season’s Hospitalizations are Highest in Nearly a Decade”


For more information, please call 1.877.426.7779