



More than luck needed to avoid flu

Now that flu season is just around the corner, it is time to take basic precautions.

Contracting the flu is a miserable experience. However, viruses that just make some people sick can be deadly to others, particularly those with weakened immune systems.

Initially, it is difficult to distinguish the primary symptoms of the flu virus -- a fever, sore throat and cough, headache, loss of appetite, and overall exhaustion -- from those of a bacterial infection. Since the flu is caused by a virus, an antibiotic drug will not affect it.

However, bacterial pneumonia is one of the most serious (and potentially deadly) complications of the flu. Timely use of antibiotics can save lives when this type of pneumonia occurs. Consequently, doctors prescribe antibiotics if they suspect that bacteria have invaded a body whose defenses are first weakened by the viral infection.

In order to be proactive rather than waiting for the flu to attack, there are three very important steps we can take to prepare ourselves for a viral encounter and prevent or lessen the symptoms of the flu.

First, if possible, get seasonal flu shots. This is especially important for senior citizens and those with immunodeficiency diseases like HIV. However, since there is a limited amount of flu vaccine available this season, only those with the greatest risk may have access to vaccination.

Second, take more precautions to prevent the transmission of the virus. Wash your hands frequently and keep hands (including those of your children) away from your mouth, eyes, and ears.

Third, and just as important as a flu shot, strengthen your immune system with proper diet and exercise. Research has shown that viruses that are typically mild can become extremely dangerous in animals that are malnourished.

Studies published in the mid-1990s by Melinda Beck and her colleagues at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, discovered that some normally harmless viruses can convert to a deadly strain in animals that are deficient in antioxidant nutrients such as vitamin E and selenium.

Humans require about 50 nutrients from their diets. A balanced intake of all these nutrients may be essential for dealing with viruses. It is known that many nu-

trients function to strengthen the immune system while other nutrients function to weaken invading viruses.

To maintain a healthy immune system, the body needs adequate protein for the production of antibodies. Vitamins A and E, as well as vitamin B-6, biotin, folate, and B-12 are especially important for the overall health of the immune system. Some minerals of particular importance are selenium, zinc, and copper

Taking high doses of some nutrient supplements may do more harm than good. Excessive quantities can cause the body additional stress and reduce resistance to viral infection. For example, rats deficient in vitamin E were more seriously affected by viral invaders when the rats had a high intake of iron or omega-3 fatty acids from fish oil

Don't rely on luck this flu season. Be proactive and eat a balanced diet, take a moderate level multivitamin mineral supplement, and remember to drink fluids. If you get the flu, call your doctor as soon as possible to see if the new flu drugs are appropriate for you.

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