

The future of influenza control

Influenza is not just a bad cold. Certainly the symptoms are somewhat similar, but the 'flu is potentially a life threatening disease.

Typically people with the 'flu experience a sudden high fever, cold shivers, sore throat, headache, muscle aches and pains, chest pain and cough.

In otherwise healthy adults, the worst of the symptoms usually last for three or four days; but significant feelings of ill health can linger on for weeks; and for people in certain high risk groups whose immune systems are already under stress, the consequences can be very serious.

The virus apparently picks its victims, singling out those people least able to resist the adverse effects. The greatest concern for doctors and patients alike is the danger, not just of the flu itself, but of severe complications such as pneumonia and the effect of influenza on existing medical conditions.

People with chronic heart, kidney or lung disease, diabetes or other long-term illnesses are particularly vulnerable. The stress caused by influenza can worsen these conditions and even cause premature death.

Today, prevention is our major weapon against influenza. You can help protect yourself by making sure your lifestyle is healthy with regular exercise you enjoy and a daily diet that includes the widest possible variety of foods. And, of course, annual vaccination against the flu is recommended for all people in high risk categories.

Everyone 65 years or older should have the 'flu vaccine. As well, at any age, you should be vaccinated if you have an ongoing illness such as diabetes, kidney disease, asthma, heart or circulation problems, or compromised immunity as a result of HIV, cancer, or long-term steroid use.

It is especially important for people in nursing homes, hostels and long care facilities to have the 'flu vaccine.

Now there is also a special effort to ensure people who might spread the infection to the above groups are vaccinated. This includes health workers - doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists and carers.

Because of the changing nature of the flu virus, it is almost always necessary for the vaccine to be reformulated each year. New forms of the virus are named after the place where they were first identified.

The 'flu vaccine for the southern hemisphere winter 2008 contains inactivated viruses of the type found recently in the Solomon Islands, Florida and Brisbane; and these strains are the ones considered most likely to cause problems in Australia this year.

Research has shown that 'flu pandemics (major worldwide epidemics of influenza) are likely to occur every 30 or 40 years. The most recent pandemic was the so-called Hong Kong 'flu of 1968. So another global outbreak is considered to be likely soon – a reason why the recent avian 'flu scare caused so much concern.

What was known as the "Spanish flu", early last century, killed more than 20 million people – including 12,000 Australians out of a total population then of less than 5 million.

We can reduce the risk of becoming a 'flu statistic for the next generation to look back on by getting our 2008 'flu vaccine.

Again this year the Australian Government will provide 'flu vaccine free of charge to everyone 65 years plus. For everyone else the 'flu vaccine is a subsidised pharmaceutical benefit.

While you're at the doctors ask about the benefit of pneumonia vaccine – recommended every five years or so for those of us in the high risk groups.

You can get more advice about whether the 'flu vaccine is right for you from pharmacies around Australia providing the Self Care health information. Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.