

Common sense care for coughs and colds

In Geneva each year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) hosts a meeting of health ministers, health bureaucrats and delegates from non-governmental agencies.

The aim of this so-called World Health Assembly is to discuss and develop strategies to more effectively prevent and better manage disease and ill health.

This year, not surprisingly, the Mexican or swine flu was high on the agenda.

Despite its steady spread in recent weeks, most of us in Australia will be able to avoid the swine flu; and with reasonable precautions we should also be able to avoid the regular seasonal flu. Nevertheless, influenza is potentially a serious problem for people in high risk groups. Every year in Australia nearly 3000 people die from influenza complications – worldwide the death toll is much greater still. The emergence of the swine flu has served as a reminder of just how easily a flu pandemic can arise, and just how vigilant our public health system, and we as individuals need to be to minimise the risk.

At the World Health Assembly the WHO Health and Medical Services were issuing a leaflet titled “cough etiquette for people with flu like symptoms”. The advice it offers is to: (1) cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing (2) dispose of used tissues immediately in a bin, and (3) clean your hands after coughing or sneezing, either by washing your hands with soap and water, or by hand rubbing with an alcohol based product. (Tissues and an alcohol based antibacterial gel were being supplied to all delegates to the Assembly.)

The WHO “cough etiquette” advice is useful for all of us; because although we might miss the flu, we will almost certainly get a cold this winter. And while it’s generally known that the cold and flu viruses are spread by inhaling the droplets coughed or sneezed out by an infected person, those viruses are also spread by hand contact – or often by using shared contaminated objects (utensils, towels, toys, telephones and so on).

Of course, the symptoms of colds and flu are similar; a really bad cold can be mistaken for the flu; even though the consequences can be quite different.

Colds usually begin gradually, usually with an irritated throat which has a kind of “scratchy” feel about it. Sneezing and a runny nose follows. A mild fever sometimes develops and you may get a slight cough as well. The secretions from the nose, at first watery, become thicker and possibly a yellow/green colour.

As a general rule, flu symptoms come on more suddenly with a high temperature; often a headache and body aches and pains. You generally feel weak and fatigued. Initially the cough is dry, but becomes severe and productive.

A cough may be classified as “productive” where you have plenty of mucus or phlegm irritating the airways and just itching to be coughed up, or “dry” – when it is simply nagging and annoying to both the person with the cough and all those close enough to be within earshot.

Coughs may also be described as “acute” or “chronic”. Acute coughs are generally caused by a viral or bacterial infection – perhaps a cold, the flu or pneumonia. They may also be caused by a foreign body or environmental pollutants such as smoke or fumes. Chronic coughs, those lasting many weeks or months, are usually caused by cigarette smoking (both active and passive smoking). The most likely causes of chronic cough in non-smokers are post-nasal drip, asthma and gastro-oesophageal reflux disease. Some prescription medicines, especially those used to treat high blood pressure, may also cause a chronic cough. So a cough mixture may not be the solution to a chronic cough problem.

However long the duration of your cough, whether you’ve got a hacking cough or just a tickle and especially if you’re taking other medicines, check with your pharmacist before you self select a treatment. And ask for one of the fact cards titled *Coughs or Colds and Flu*. They’re available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society’s (PSA) Self Care health information. Phone 1300 369 772 for the nearest location or log on to the PSA website at www.psa.org.au