



Oh No!

Not Flu Season Again



As I sit at home today, I am one of millions who will suffer from the flu this season. My symptoms have been fairly typical; fever, chills, weakness, headache, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches. Symptoms can vary greatly from person to person. Some will have no obvious symptoms. My fever may last from one to six days.

Flu, short for influenza, is a viral infection of the nose, throat, and lungs. Although it is generally a mild disease in younger or middle-aged, healthy adults, it can be more severe and even life-threatening in older people or those with chronic illnesses such as COPD, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, asthma, heart disease, kidney disease, or diabetes. That is why it is especially important for those individuals to concentrate on prevention of influenza.

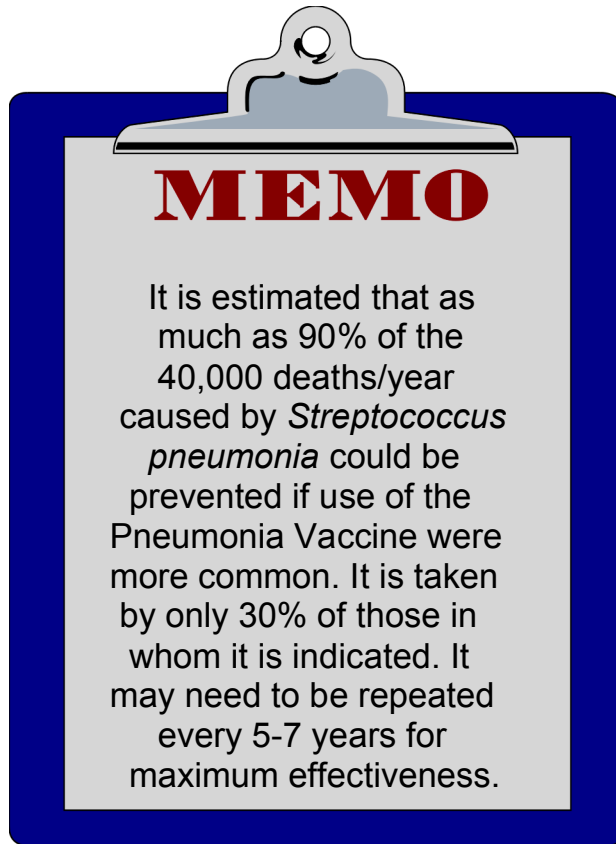
The flu spreads rapidly from one person to another. For this reason, people used to think it spread under the influence of the stars and planets. In the 1500's, the Italians called the disease "influenza," their word for influence.

The flu is rarely fatal or even serious. However, when your body is weakened by fighting off the virus, it is less able to resist a second infection. Therefore, it is not uncommon to develop a secondary infection. If the infection goes to the lungs, such as in pneumonia, it can be life threatening. Pneumonia is one of the five leading causes of death in those 65 and over.

Prevention is the Key

Vaccination is the best form of prevention. The Public Health Service's Advisory Committee and Center for Disease Control recommend that people 65 and older or those with chronic illness (such as lung problems) get a yearly flu shot. Because the flu virus changes every year, the vaccine must be reformulated. Side effects can include a low-grade fever and some redness at the injection site. Flu vaccines may include egg products and those with egg allergies should check before taking it.

You may also want to take the pneumonia vaccine. This prevents most strep pneumonias, which occur commonly in older individuals. While neither shot is a 100% guarantee against catching the flu or pneumonia, the benefits generally outweigh any potential side effects. Both vaccines are covered by Medicare.



Other ways to prevent the flu include good general fitness (i.e., eat well, get plenty of sleep, and drink lots of fluids) so that your body is better able to fight off the virus. You should also avoid areas where you may be exposed to the virus (e.g., large crowds, physician waiting rooms, nursing homes, daycares), especially during peak flu season.

If you do catch the flu, the usual treatment is drinking lots of fluids, bed rest until the fever has been gone for 1-2 days, and aspirin for the fever. Contact your doctor right away if you have lung disease and you catch the flu. There are anti-viral drugs (e.g., amantadine) that can be used in those at high risk.