



Fighting the flu

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Here we are in the early days of flu season, but this is not the flu season we have been accustomed to, is it?

Not only is it time for the usual seasonal flu, but this time we are also seeing the spread of a new flu, H1N1. In addition to immunization (for both) there are things you can do to protect yourself and your family.

Influenza viruses are spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes and their germs enter the nose, throat or eyes of another person. They can also come to rest on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs later to be picked up on hands and transmitted to the respiratory system when that person touches their mouth and/or nose.

Knowing how influenza virus spreads makes it easy to know what things to do to prevent it. The first thing is to wash hands often using soap and warm water or to use a hand sanitizer. If you have to cough or sneeze, do so into a tissue (and toss it right away) or into your elbow, away from your hands and not into the air.

Keeping common surfaces clean is an excellent second step. That means doorknobs, light switches, telephones and keyboards — any surface touched by many people.

Getting the flu shots is also important. That means two: the seasonal one, (for those at high risk), plus the H1N1 version, (one in each arm). For people with weakened immune systems, or are likely to come into contact with influenza, this is especially important. If you are pregnant, are under 65 and have a chronic illness, are aboriginal or living in an isolated or remote community you will have first access to the H1N1 vaccine.

Another tool being used in some situations is antiviral medication. This is not the same as being vaccinated. Vaccination prevents the flu from infecting; antivirals are not recommended as a preventative. Rather, they are used in moderate to severe cases of H1N1 influenza. What they do is to reduce the ability of the virus to reproduce. The Public Health Agency of Canada is not recommending the use of antivirals (two are available: Tamiflu and Relenza) for prevention or early treatment because most people are recovering just fine on their own.

Reserving the antivirals for serious cases also means less likelihood that the virus will become resistant to those drugs if they are overused to treat mild cases.

Vaccines, on the other hand, are designed to produce immunity. They do this by stimulating the production of antibodies and are the primary means of preventing illness and death from influenza. These vaccines that are being offered this year are safe and effective.

There is more information about the flu and H1N1 this year than has ever been available. So much so that

it can overwhelm a person. That said, a great place to look is www.fightflu.ca and www.immunizebc.ca. Your family physician and Public Health are also great resources. A booklet called “Look after yourself” is available. It

combines all the recommendations for prevention and treatment in a clear and common-sense way.

You now have the basic information for avoiding the flu, both of them, but to be completely clear: we recommend that people get both their seasonal flu shot, and the H1N1 vaccination.

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