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Influenza Treatment

When to Seek Help

Most people with the flu recover within one to two weeks without treatment. However, serious complications of the flu can occur. Call your doctor or nurse immediately if:

- You feel short of breath or have trouble breathing
- You have pain or pressure in your chest or stomach
- You have signs of being dehydrated, such as dizziness when standing or not passing urine
- You feel confused
- You cannot stop vomiting or you cannot drink enough fluids

In children, you should seek help if the child has any of the above or if the child:

- Has blue or purplish skin color
- Is so irritable that he or she does not want to be held
- Does not have tears when crying (in infants)
- Has a fever with a rash
- Does not wake up easily

There are several groups of people who are at increased risk for flu complications. These include pregnant women, young children (<5 years of age and especially <2 years of age), people ≥65 years of age, and people with certain diseases such as chronic lung disease (such as asthma), heart disease, diabetes, immunosuppressing conditions (such as HIV infection or transplantation), and some other diseases. If you or your child has flu symptoms and is at increased risk for flu complications, you should call your doctor.

Treat Symptoms

Treating the symptoms of influenza can help you to feel better but will not make the flu go away faster.

- Rest until the flu is fully resolved, especially if the illness has been severe.
- Fluids: Drink enough fluids so that you do not become dehydrated. One way to judge if you are drinking enough is to look at the color of your urine. Normally, urine should be light yellow to nearly colorless. If you are drinking enough, you should pass urine every three to five hours.

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- Acetaminophen (Tylenol ®) can relieve fever, headache, and muscle aches. Aspirin and medicines that include aspirin are not recommended for children under 18 because aspirin can lead to a serious disease called Reye syndrome.
- Cough medicines are not usually helpful; cough usually resolves without treatment. We don't recommend cough or cold medicine for children under age 6 years.

Antiviral Treatment

Antiviral medicines can be used to treat or prevent influenza. When used as a treatment, the medicine does not eliminate flu symptoms, although it can reduce the severity and duration of symptoms by about one day. Not every person with influenza needs an antiviral medicine, but some people do; the decision is based upon several factors. If you are severely ill and/or have risk factors for developing complications of influenza, you will need an antiviral agent. People who are only mildly ill and have no risk factors for complications are usually treated with an antiviral medicine if they have had symptoms for 48 hours or less, but they are not treated if they have had symptoms for more than 48 hours.

Antiviral medicines that are used to treat the flu include oseltamivir (Tamiflu ®), zanamivir (Relenza ®), peramivir (Rapivab ®), and baloxavir (Xofluza ®). Antiviral treatment is most effective for seasonal influenza when it is taken within the first 48 hours of flu symptoms. The best antiviral medicine depends upon the type of influenza virus, if the virus could be resistant, and some individual factors. A doctor should make this decision.

Side Effects: Zanamivir and oseltamivir can cause mild side effects, including nausea and vomiting; zanamivir, which is inhaled, can cause difficulty breathing in some cases. Diarrhea is the most common side effect of peramivir and baloxavir. Most people are able to continue the medicine despite the side effects.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics are NOT useful for treating viral illnesses such as influenza. Antibiotics should only be used if there is a bacterial complication of the flu such as bacterial pneumonia, ear infection, or sinusitis. Antibiotics can cause side effects and lead to development of antibiotic resistance.

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Complementary and Alternative Treatments

There are a wide variety of herbal, homeopathic, and other complementary and alternative treatments that are marketed for influenza. Unfortunately, there have been few well-designed studies to evaluate their efficacy and safety and we cannot specifically recommend or endorse any specific complementary or alternative treatment.