

It's flu season in Ontario

Every year around this time we begin to hear a lot about influenza (the flu) and the need to protect ourselves and our families. Health care providers, some pharmacies and health unit clinics are now offering the flu shot as a way to protect Ontarians, especially our most vulnerable populations.

Influenza (not the stomach flu) is a respiratory illness that circulates through our communities from around October to May. The virus is easily spread through sneezing, coughing and from virus-contaminated surfaces. Symptoms can include headache, chills, cough, fever, loss of appetite, muscle aches and fatigue, and unlike a cold, is severe enough to cause even healthy people to need a few days in bed to recover.

Infants and children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems or medical conditions are most susceptible to the flu. Getting it can lead to hospitalization, and unfortunately some people die from the illness every year. Last year there were a number of younger adults who succumbed to the flu, underlying the importance of immunization even for healthy and young individuals.

Parents are strongly encouraged to get themselves and their kids immunized. Kids are often carriers of the virus, meaning that they can infect others with it, even when they are not sick. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine available for babies under 6 months of age, making it very important that anyone in contact with infants be immunized.

The flu shot usually prevents illness in about 60-80 per cent of healthy children and adults. For the small portion of people who get the flu despite being vaccinated, the illness is usually less severe and shorter in length. It takes about two weeks to get full protection after getting the flu shot. By getting the flu shot as early as possible, you not only protect yourself, but the people you work, play and live with.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) in Canada states that a newer vaccine in the form of a nasal spray (Flumist®) is preferred in healthy children between two and five years of age. Unfortunately this vaccine is not publicly funded in Ontario and will cost about \$30 at some pharmacies. It will not be available until late in November and must be administered by your health care provider. However, the flu shot is still very effective for your children and is available now. As we already have flu illness in our area, I chose not to wait and had my own two children (3 and 1.5 years of age) receive the publicly funded flu shot a couple of weeks ago.

Beyond getting vaccinated, you can take actions to stop the spread of germs:

- ? Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based sanitizer;
- ? Cough into your sleeve or use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth and throw it away immediately;
- ? Avoid close contact with people who are ill; and
- ? Stay home if you are sick.

For more information about the flu and the importance of getting immunized, contact the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health Unit at 1-800-265-7293 or visit www.wdgpUBLICHEALTH.ca

By Dr. Colin Lee