Knowing what to do — and not to do — about the flu

The following are common misconceptions about the flu, prepared by Harvard Health Publications.[1]

If you've ever had the flu, you know how sick you can be. Chances are good that some of the advice friends and family gave you about the flu was incorrect. Take a look at the top 10 common flu myths and be sure to arm yourself with correct information next flu season.

Myth #1: You can catch the flu from the vaccine.

The vaccine is made from an inactivated virus that can't transmit infection.[2] People who get sick after receiving a flu vaccination might get sick anyway. It takes a week or two for the protective benefits from the vaccine to kick-in. However, some people assume that because they got sick after getting the vaccine, the shot caused their illness. Yet, research has shown that this is not possible.[2]

Myth #2: Healthy people don't need to be vaccinated.

The flu vaccination may be routinely recommended for people who have a chronic illness. However, anyone — even healthy folks — may benefit from being vaccinated. World Health Organization's (WHO) current guidelines suggest that children ages 6 months to 19 years old, pregnant women, and anyone over age 49 should consider being vaccinated each year.[3] In addition, the WHO recommends the flu shot for healthy people who might spread the virus to others who are particularly susceptible. For this reason, health care workers are routinely advised to get the flu vaccination in order to better protect their own patients.

Myth #3: Getting the flu vaccination is all you need to do to protect yourself from the flu.

There are additional steps you can take to protect yourself during flu season besides vaccination. Avoid contact with people who have the flu, wash your hands frequently. If soap and water is not available readily, consider an alcohol based hand sanitiser. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth after contact with persons or surfaces you think may be exposed to the virus. Germs spread this way.

Myth #4: The flu is just a bad cold.

Influenza may cause bad cold-like symptoms, such as a sore throat, runny nose, sneezing, hoarseness and a cough. In 2018, WHO estimated that globally up to 5 million people were hospitalised each year because of a severe illness and up to 650,000 cases resulted in death.[3]

Myth #5: You can't spread the flu if you're feeling well.

Actually, 20% to 30% of people carrying the influenza virus have no symptoms.[2]

Myth #6: You don't need to get a flu shot every year.

The influenza virus changes (mutates) frequently. Therefore getting vaccinated each year is recommended by WHO to ensure immunity to the most current strains most likely to cause an outbreak.[3]

Myth #7: You can catch the flu from going out in cold weather without a coat, with wet hair or by sitting near a draughty window.

The only way to catch the flu is by being exposed to the influenza virus. Flu season coincides with the cold weather, so people often associate the flu with cold, draughty environments. They happen at the same time, but it is not a cause and effect relationship.

Myth #8: Feed a cold, starve a fever.

If you have the flu (or a cold) and a fever, you need more fluids. Consult your healthcare provider to see if you might benefit from increasing or decreasing how much you eat. Though you may have no appetite, "starving" yourself will accomplish little. In addition, poor nutrition will not help you get better.

Myth #9: Chicken soup will speed your recovery from the flu.

Hot liquids can soothe a sore throat and provide much needed fluids. However, chicken soup has no other specific qualities that can help fight the flu.

Myth #10: If you have a high fever with the flu that lasts more than a day or two, antibiotics may be necessary.

Antibiotics work well against bacteria, but they aren't effective for a viral infection like the flu. Then again, some people develop a bacterial infection as a complication of the flu, so it may be a good idea to be checked out by your doctor if your symptoms drag on or worsen.

1. Harvard Health Publications, "10 Flu Myths: Dispelling misinformation about the flu vaccine, sickness, treatment, and recovery," November 2009
2. American Medical Association, "Effectiveness and cost-benefit of influenza vaccination of healthy working adults: A randomized controlled trial," October 2000
3. World Health Organization, "Influenza (Seasonal): Fact sheet," November 2018

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