

## Health Link

### Understanding Influenza: Is it a Cold or the Flu?

Fighting a bug is never fun, but how can you get better if you don't know what you're dealing with?

Because colds and flu share many symptoms, it can be difficult, or even impossible, to tell the difference.

Influenza, or the seasonal flu, is a common and highly contagious infectious respiratory disease that affects the nose, throat and lungs. Influenza viruses can change rapidly and that's why there is a new flu shot made every year to protect against what is anticipated to be the three most prevalent circulating virus strains.

The common cold is a mild infection of the nose and throat caused by a variety of viruses. Although a cold might linger, the symptoms, such as a runny nose, sneezing, cough and sore throat, remain mild.

While some of the symptoms of influenza are the same as the common cold, the flu almost always presents with a sudden onset of cough and fever. It is also common to feel fatigue, muscle aches, a headache and a decreased appetite. Sometimes nausea, vomiting and diarrhea are symptoms of the flu.

Some people shrug off the flu, thinking it's a cold. If you have flu-like symptoms and are at greater risk of developing complications if you do get sick, contact a health care provider as soon as possible. See your family doctor about antiviral medication, get lots of rest, eat healthy foods and drink lots of fluids.

Children under five years of age and pregnant women are just two examples of people at risk of complications. People with chronic conditions such as heart disease, liver or kidney disease, blood disorders, diabetes, asthma and chronic lung disease and those who are immunosuppressed can also be compromised and are at high risk for complications from the flu.

If you come down with the flu, avoid visiting the hospital unless your symptoms worsen. Severe symptoms include shortness of breath, rapid or difficulty breathing, chest pain, bluish or grey skin colour, blood or coloured mucus/spit,

sudden dizziness or confusion, severe or persistent vomiting, high fever lasting more than three days and low blood pressure.

The majority of the patient population at an acute-care hospital is at greater risk of complications from the flu and tend to be more susceptible to infection. That's why we ask that you do not visit patients if you are ill with any respiratory illness.

Did you know that influenza can spread to someone else who is six feet away through coughing or sneezing? That's why it is important to "cover your cough" or "cough into your sleeve." You may be asked to mask when visiting the hospital during widespread influenza activity and you should always perform hand hygiene with the alcohol-based hand sanitizer upon entering and exiting the building and before and after visiting a patient. Influenza is contagious to others for 24 hours prior to the onset of any symptoms and for an additional five days from the onset of symptoms.

Here in Muskoka, influenza season has arrived. The local health unit is reporting widespread flu activity in Simcoe and Muskoka as the number of lab-confirmed cases of influenza continues to climb.

The declaration of community-wide influenza activity reinforces the need to protect yourself against influenza and activates the hospital's influenza immunization policy for its staff. All staff at MAHC must be immunized with this year's flu shot, take an antiviral, or wear a mask to ensure the safety of our patients while this community-wide declaration is in effect.

Have you been vaccinated? It's not too late. The flu shot is your best chance at protecting yourself from infection as the vaccine is described as an excellent match to the circulating flu strains, but be mindful that it takes two weeks to offer you full protection.

*Health Link is an awareness column brought to you on behalf of Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare.*