

Fight the flu

Written by Sean Green
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The influenza virus has hit the area hard this year, so learn how to stay healthy

It starts with a few coughs, maybe a runny nose and sore throat. Then a low grade fever. And then it gets worse — body aches, high fever, nausea, fatigue. It is the flu. And it's everywhere.

Widespread flu activity is being reported in 41 states, including Louisiana.

Ken Pastoric with the Department of Health and Hospitals said since tracking of flu like symptoms began in October, the website www.fighttheflu.la.gov noted that as of week 40, the reported cases of the flu had slowly increased state wide and as of last week was hovering near seven percent.

“Beginning shortly before Christmas, our area was struck by a widespread outbreak. Some schools reported as many as 60 percent of their students out sick,” said Michelle Davison, assistant executive director of the Northwest Louisiana Red Cross.

Over the last month, other strains have begun making the rounds and November to March is typically the peak time for the flu.

That is why the Red Cross urges everyone to get a flu vaccine now.

“It is your best protection against the flu. That does not mean you are 100 percent safe from getting the flu, but it offers you your best chance not to,” said Davison. “In addition, even if you get the flu, the flu vaccine helps to strengthen your immune system, which may help you recover more quickly.”

More importantly, today’s strains can be deadly to anyone. Typically, the most at risk are the very young, very old and those with compromised immune systems.

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However, Davison notes the H1N1 virus, or swine flu, seems most deadly to seemingly healthy young adults – a group that, in the past, was considered the least susceptible to fatal complications.

“H1N1 is included in this year’s flu vaccine. The virus strains included in the flu vaccine change every year, so you need to get your flu shot annually. There is nothing in the flu shot that can give you the flu,” she said.

The Red Cross also recommends these steps to prevent the spread of the flu virus during what the Centers for Disease Control says is the worst influenza outbreak in several years in the United States:

- Cover the nose and mouth with a tissue or sleeve when coughing or sneezing, and throw the tissue away after use. If a tissue isn’t available, cough or sneeze into the elbow, not the hands.
- Wash hands often, especially after coughing or sneezing. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand-rub.
- Avoid touching the eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Tissue, hand sanitizer, and products for cleaning spaces are three basic purchases for fighting germs around the home and office.
- If you're sick, stay home and keep your germs out of the public. Stay at home for at least 24 hours after no longer having a fever or severe symptoms.

If someone in the household does come down with the flu, the Red Cross wants everyone to know the best way to care for them:

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- Designate one person as the caregiver and have the other household members avoid close contact with that person so they won't become sick.

- Designate a sick room for the person if possible. If there is more than one sick person, they can share the sick room if needed. If there is more than one bathroom, designate one for those who are sick to use. Give each sick person their own drinking glass, washcloth and towel.

- Give plenty of liquids (water and other clear liquids) at the first sign of flu and continue throughout the illness. People with the flu need to drink extra fluids to keep from getting dehydrated.

- If the person gets very sick, is pregnant or has a medical condition (like asthma) that puts them at higher risk of flu complications, call their doctor. They may need to be examined and might need antiviral medicine to treat the flu.

- Keep everyone's personal items separate. All household members should avoid sharing pens, papers, clothes, towels, sheets, blankets, food or eating utensils unless cleaned between uses.

- Wash everyone's dishes in the dishwasher or by hand using very hot water and soap. Wash everyone's clothes in a standard washing machine. Use detergent and very hot water, tumble dry on a hot dryer setting and wash hands after handling dirty laundry.

- Wear disposable gloves when in contact with or cleaning up body fluids.