

Headlines in every American newspaper are declaring this the worst flu season in years. According to the Centers for Disease Control 114,000 Americans are hospitalized with influenza each year. Of those, nearly 36,000 die, most are over 65, less than 100 are children. This year's influenza appears to be having a greater effect on children than other strains have had in years past.

Influenza is a contagious, respiratory illness. Its symptoms include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches. Occasionally children may also have gastrointestinal symptoms as well, although the notion of a "stomach flu" is a misnomer as flu is a respiratory illness.

The influenza virus can be spread through the air or by touching a surface with the flu virus on it. To avoid the flu, an influenza shot is the best defense. Flu shots are not live vaccines and therefore cannot cause you to get the flu. Occasionally people will develop the flu shortly after receiving the vaccine. This is the result of having been exposed to the virus prior to receiving the vaccine, or before it is able to take full effect. There are instances when you may develop the flu, even having had the flu shot. At these times, the symptoms are likely to be much milder than they would have been without the flu vaccine.

To reduce the spread of influenza and other respiratory illnesses, avoid close contact with sick people, stay home when you are sick, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing and sneezing and wash your hands often. Consider purchasing and carrying with you a liquid, antibacterial hand sanitizer. These products are particularly useful when kept at the ready for use after coughing into your hands, blowing your nose or touching anything that might have the flu virus on it. This will not only reduce the amount of water you use and the number of trips you make to the restroom, but will also minimize your risk of spreading illness by ensuring your hands are always clean.

Should, despite your best efforts, you become sick, the Centers for Disease Control recommends you get plenty of rest, drink lots of fluids, and avoid alcohol and tobacco. They also warn never to give aspirin to a child or teenager with a fever and other flu-like symptoms without first consulting with a doctor.

Historically February is the peak month for flu activity. Do your part to reduce the spread by keeping your hands clean and staying home when you are not feeling well.