Chicago Flu Outbreak Proves It's Not Too Late To Get Vaccinated

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So far, this has been a mild flu season in the Chicago area, but beware -- we're not completely out of the woods yet.

A Catholic school on Chicago's Southwest Side discovered that when more than 200 of its 700 students plus several teachers called in sick because of an outbreak of the flu this month.

"In a closed environment with runny noses and coughs and sneezes... viruses of all kinds can travel pretty easily," said Dr. Anita Varkey, assistant professor, general internal medicine, Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, Maywood, Ill.

Flu activity can occur as late as May, and in any single season more than one strain of influenza may circulate, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Fortunately, this year's vaccine has been a good match to the virus strains that are circulating in the United States. So getting a vaccine this late in the season can still offer protection, even if flu activity has already started in your area.

"Doctors used to advise getting a flu shot only in October and November. Now doctors vaccinate through February because it takes about two weeks to develop an antibody response after the flu shot," said Dr. Michael Koller, associate professor, Stritch School of Medicine. "For the last 30 years in the United States, February has been the peak month for illness."

The flu (or influenza) is a highly contagious viral infection that attacks the respiratory system. Each year in the U.S. between five to 20 percent of the population contracts the flu. All children age 6 months to 18 years should get vaccinated against the flu. The CDC also recommends vaccinations for people age 50 and older and anyone with a chronic illness such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease. This includes people who have weakened immune systems and those infected with HIV (the virus that causes AIDS).

"Flu is primarily spread by respiratory droplets," Koller said. "When somebody with influenza coughs or sneezes, out shoots this spray of flu virus that can infect anyone nearby. In addition to covering your mouth when you cough and covering your nose when you sneeze, it's really important to wash your hands."

We are also still in the season when people are more likely to suffer a cold. For some people flu is a much more serious illness that can lead to hospitalization, pneumonia or death, so it's important to know the difference between the two and when to seek treatment.

Is it a Cold or the Flu?

The flu and colds are respiratory illnesses caused by different viruses that are highly contagious. The illnesses have similar symptoms, making it very difficult to tell them apart. The flu is generally worse than a cold. Its symptoms are more common and severe. Colds are usually milder. Cold sufferers' symptoms are generally located in the nasal area. Colds usually do not result in serious health problems.

How to Tell the Difference

Cold symptoms are usually milder. They may include a sore throat,

runny nose, nasal congestion, laryngitis, low-grade fever with muscle aches and a general rundown feeling. Colds last about a week and are more common during the winter. Flu symptoms are generally much more serious and intense. It's been said they once you have the flu, you never forget it. Flu symptoms tend to come on abruptly and affect the entire body. Symptoms include a high fever, intense chills, body aches, exhaustion and constant, unproductive cough. In our area, flu appears almost only during the winter. The flu generally last longer than a cold.

If You Think You Have the Flu

Vaccination is the best way to prevent a case of the flu. If you are experiencing flu-like symptoms, it is best to act fast and speak to your doctor within 12 to 48 hours.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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