

Flu is dampening holiday spirit, infectious disease expert says

December 16 2014, by Stasia Thompson

Vomiting, diarrhea and fever – that's what many people are experiencing this holiday season as the seasonal flu grips Chicago.

"Loyola documented several [cases](#) of the [flu](#) before Thanksgiving and we now have confirmed more than 120 cases of patients with the flu, which is early to start and also a high number," said Jorge Parada, MD, MPH, FACP, FIDSA, FSHEA, medical director of the Infection Prevention & Control program at Loyola University Health System. "If you haven't gotten your [flu shot](#) yet, put it at the top of your to-do list and get it now."

Despite the recent reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that the flu vaccine is not effective against certain active strains, Dr. Parada urged everyone to still get vaccinated.

"If you have not gotten your flu shot, get it as soon as possible," he said. "There are many varieties of flu and the flu vaccine still offers protection."

He advised everyone to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water or hand sanitizer to minimize risks. Dr. Parada and other Loyola physicians have seen a large spike in flu cases in the past few weeks.

"Just in the last week Loyola had more than double the number of lab-confirmed cases of flu that we had during the peak week of last season – and it isn't over yet."

For the sixth year in a row, Loyola has required that all employees, students, volunteers and even vendors receive the seasonal [flu vaccination](#).

"Loyola achieved a 100 percent participation rate with 99 percent of staff receiving the vaccine and only 15 individuals receiving an exemption from immunization. Basically everyone at Loyola has been vaccinated. Impressively, we were able to accomplish this in a record short time period," said Dr. Parada, who oversees the Loyola flu campaign. "Some jobs require you to wear a helmet and steel-toed boots," he said. "Hospital staff need vaccinations to protect themselves and others from infectious diseases."

Loyola is an academic medical center and takes that designation seriously.

"When people are ill they go to the doctor, and when they are really ill they go to the hospital, and as an academic medical center, Loyola cares for the sickest of the sick," Dr. Parada said. "Our staff needs self-protection from patients with the flu and we also need to not transmit the flu to vulnerable patients. Requirement of the flu vaccination is a win-win situation."

Flu Fallacies

Parada has heard every excuse associated with the flu vaccination and offered his expertise.

"The flu vaccine doesn't work this year so what's the point?"

Dr. Parada: "The flu shot actually contains three flu vaccines. One is

directed against Influenza A type H1N1, one is directed against Influenza A type H3N2 and the third is directed against Influenza B," he said. "So far we think that the Influenza A H1N1 and the Influenza B are spot on. It is only one form of flu, the Influenza A type H3N2, that has mutated to a form that is only partially covered by the current vaccine.

"While there are two types of H3N2 flu circulating now, about 48 percent of flu cases match the strain in the vaccine. The remaining 52 percent of flu cases are not an exact match. Either way there is still a protective effect from the vaccine. So if you catch the flu, it is likely that you will have a more mild case of the flu. Who really wants to get sicker than you have to? So there are multiple flu varieties that circulate every winter and the vaccine will offer protection against most of them."

"I got the flu already so I don't need a flu shot."

Dr. Parada: "Typically there are three strains of flu that circulate during the flu season and the flu vaccine protects against all three. So even if you've had the flu, get your flu shot so you do not get the flu a couple of more times."

"It's too late; the flu is already here."

Dr. Parada: "The flu season usually peaks in early February and lasts well into April, so it is not too late to get a flu shot. Plus, so far only one type of flu seems to have arrived in the area. We still expect new strains to arrive. To me it is simple – get the flu shot before the flu gets you."

"I got a flu shot last year."

Dr. Parada: "Just like everyone can catch the flu every season, everyone needs to get a flu shot every year. The immunization lasts for one season

and also the formula changes. This year's flu vaccine is different than that of last year, for example. Also, the protective effect of the flu shot tends to wear down over time, so even while this year's flu shot might have some match to last year's flu shot, getting a new flu shot will act as a booster to your defenses."

"The flu shot makes you sick."

Dr. Parada: "It takes about two weeks to build immunity after receiving the flu shot, so if you catch the flu around the time of your flu shot it wasn't because the vaccine gave it to you. Rather it was because you caught the flu before the vaccine had time to kick in and protect you. I have been an infectious disease specialist for more than 25 years and I have never seen evidence of anyone catching the flu from the flu shot."

If you do feel you have the flu, Dr. Parada offered this advice.

"Please stay home for the protection of your community as you are highly contagious and will spread the illness to others," he said. "The very young, the very old and the chronically ill are especially vulnerable and what may be a 24-hour bug to one person may be a life-threatening illness to another that lands them in the hospital."

Rest, drink fluids such as electrolytes and take over-the-counter pain medication such as ibuprofen as needed, he said.

"If you vomit or eliminate blood, get disoriented or suffer extreme fatigue, call your doctor or go to an immediate care center," he said.

Dr. Parada reminded everyone to maintain good health hygiene including washing hands.

"The flu vaccine is a once-a-year antidote but washing your hands

eliminates germs and the spread of disease on an everyday basis," he said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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