Staying Healthy During Flu Season

Though last year’s flu season was unusually mild, up to 40% of the residents in your community will succumb to the flu this winter. This handout is designed to ensure that you aren’t part of this group.

What is the Flu?
- Influenza or “flu” is an infection of the respiratory tract caused by the influenza virus.
- It occurs in three types: A, B and C. Influenza A and B cause infection in humans; influenza C causes infection in animals.
- The virus typically incubates for 24 to 48 hours and can affect people of any age and background.
- The flu season is annual, because proteins that coat the virus change constantly.

How is Influenza Spread?
- The influenza virus is spread through the air. By coughing, an infected person fills the air with microscopic droplets of influenza virus that others inhale. When the particles land on the linings of the nose, throat or airways, the virus starts reproducing quickly.
- The flu has a rapid onset, with symptoms that are usually more severe than the common cold. In most cases, the flu causes headache, fever, chills, muscle aches, an overall lousy feeling (malaise), cough and sometimes a sore throat.
- Stress, excessive fatigue and poor nutrition are some of the main risk factors. If you’ve had a recent illness that causes lowered resistance, if you have a chronic illness (such as lung disease, heart disease or diabetes) or are pregnant, your risk for catching the flu is a bit higher than average.

How do I Prevent the Flu?
- One of the best ways to prevent the flu is by getting a vaccination every year. Adults and children of any age can get the shot at any time during the flu season. If you’re pregnant, it’s safe to receive the injection in your second or third trimester.
- If you’re allergic to eggs, do not get a flu shot unless you have undergone desensitization. The viral material used in flu vaccines is grown in eggs, so the vaccine could trigger an allergic reaction. Also, if you have a fever, do not get vaccinated until the fever subsides.
- Flu vaccination does not cause the flu, and in most cases the side effects of vaccination are minor. If you have never received the vaccination or never had the flu, you might experience fever, malaise and muscle aches. These reactions develop six to 12 hours after the injection and last for a day or two. In rare cases, a person may have an allergic reaction to the vaccine and have symptoms such as hives, welts, wheezing and difficulty breathing.
- During the flu season, try to avoid unnecessary contact with people who have upper respiratory infections. In addition, watch your stress level, eat healthy and get plenty of rest.

You Have the Flu … Now What?
- Rest, plenty of fluids and comfort measures are the best strategies for coping with the flu. Your PA may recommend specific flu medications, such as Tamiflu and Relenza, as well as acetaminophen (Tylenol) to relieve aches and fever. For congestion, cough and a runny nose, a combination of a decongestant and an antihistamine may be helpful.
- For the first few days, your PA likely will recommend bed rest and increased fluid intake. Resume your normal activities only after all your symptoms are gone.
- The flu also tends to decrease your appetite. Stick with liquids at first, then progress to small meals of bland foods. Drink at least eight glasses of water a day, in addition to other liquids.
- If you suspect that your symptoms are more than the flu, talk to your PA about other possible causes and treatments for your flu-like symptoms.

—Information adapted from Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Influenza and the Common Cold from the American Lung Association, from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fact sheets.