

H1N1 AND THE FLU

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Every fall I remind countless number of young athletes how important it is to get vaccinated against the flu. There is something profoundly sad about watching a competitor work so hard to get to a pinnacle moment in his/her life, be it the World Championships, the National Championships or even just a regional meet only to watch it be derailed by a viral infection. There are countless reasons that people give as to why they don't get vaccinated. The only one with any real validity is an actual allergy to the vaccine. In the Emergency Room we always joke. "The only people who don't get vaccinated are those who have an allergy to the vaccine or those who have never had the flu." Because once you have the real flu...you will be first in line to get vaccinated the next year.

The confusion this year revolves around H1N1 or what we commonly call the swine flu. This is simply another highly contagious strain of influenza that is making its rounds. What concerns health care providers is the number of people that will become potentially infected. Remember H1N1 is on top of all the other flu cases we will see this year. Currently there does not seem to be any significant increase in death from H1N1 when compared to traditional influenza, but there certainly is a real reason for concern. Pandemics throughout history have the capability of killing millions of people. All it takes is a subtle mutation in the H1N1 virus or other flu viruses to significantly increase their capacity to be fatal. Will this occur, we just don't know.

There really is no good treatment for H1N1. Certain anti-virals such as Tamiflu have been used in the past as an adjunct therapy, but their use will be greatly restricted this year to the elderly, the very young and the very sick. This means you probably will not be getting a prescription for Tamiflu unless you fall critically ill. In most cases prevention will be your only alternative.

The Centers for Disease Control has numerous recommendations when it comes to preparedness for this pandemic. How you as a club will respond will be a fluid response to the change in virulence of the virus and illness patterns in your own community. It will also reflect the state of panic (real, but most likely imagined) that your community will display. Some communities

may come to a grinding halt. Some schools may face closures due to illness in faculty and children, some athletic competitions will be cancelled while others will be fine. What you can be certain of is this: You will have cases come through your doors, just like you have cases of Influenza A every year. The CDC recommended response for schools can easily be used to apply to the club gymnastics setting

What is "The Flu?"

"The flu," or influenza virus, is a disease that affects the lungs, throat and nose of infected individuals. The influenza virus is an organism that is found in the environment and transmitted from person to person usually through coughing and sneezing. People of all ages can become infected and some become more ill than others. Since it is a virus, antibiotics are useless, however new antiviral drugs may be prescribed for early cases.

What are the signs and symptoms of the flu?

Common symptoms of the flu include fever, headache, fatigue, dry cough, sore throat, nasal congestion and severe body aches. Not everyone who gets the flu has every symptom, but those that do can be quite ill.

When is "flu season?"

Typically, December through March is the most common time period for flu outbreaks. Most people are contagious 1 day prior to symptom onset and 5 days after.

Do I have the flu?

There are many infections that can cause flu-like symptoms. However, if you have most of the flu symptoms during flu season, it is likely that you are suffering from an influenza infection. In addition, if you have had close contact with someone with the flu, your chances of becoming sick increase.

Who is at risk of getting the flu?

In the United States, millions of people are infected with the virus and become ill every year. People of

all ages and races are susceptible to getting the flu. However, certain groups are at higher risk of complications from the virus.

What are the complications of the flu?

Pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus and ear infections, worsening of congestive heart failure and asthma are some complications that can arise because of the flu.

What can I do to avoid getting the flu?

General precautions, such as frequent hand washing and avoiding close contact with influenza carriers, can help decrease your chance of becoming ill. Vitamin C, Zinc, and a whole host of touted homeopathic remedies are useless. The flu shot and FluMist nasal spray are two ways you can increase your protection against the virus. Remember though that the typical flu vaccine that covers Influenza A is NOT protective against H1N1. Vaccination against H1N1 requires a series of 2 vaccines that will be available around mid October. Although they are not 100% effective in preventing you from getting ill, they do decrease the chances that you will become very sick from influenza. The flu vaccine should be given in October or November, however you can still receive good protection if received in December and even the first part of January.

Who should get the flu shot?

Anyone who wants to avoid getting the flu should be vaccinated. The flu shot is a combination of killed virus particles. When injected into an individual, that person's immune system is boosted in preparation for future encounters with the influenza virus. When you get a flu shot you are essentially helping your body respond, quickly and effectively, to similar influenza viruses when you encounter them.

The FluMist nasal spray is an alternative to the injectable form of the vaccine. It contains live, but weaker (or attenuated) influenza viruses. Although the virus is alive, it has been altered so as not to make you ill.

Can the flu shot give me the flu?

Absolutely not, since the flu shot does not contain any live virus, it is impossible for the shot to give you the flu. Some people may have side effects from the vaccine itself, such as pain or redness at the injection site, but it is not possible to contract the flu from the vaccine.

Who should NOT get the flu shot?

Individuals who are allergic to hen's eggs, have had serious reactions to the shot in the past, or have suffered from Guillain-Barre within 6 weeks after a previous flu shot should not get a flu shot.

What can I do if I already have the flu?

There is no "cure" for the flu, but there are ways to

decrease the effects of flu symptoms. Those who are infected should get plenty of rest and hydration with clear fluids; take Tylenol for aches, pain and fever; and take over-the-counter medications to help with symptoms. Never give aspirin to children or adolescents with the flu since it may cause a deadly condition known as Reye's Syndrome. There are some prescription drugs available that have been shown to decrease the duration and severity of illness if taken quickly after the beginning of symptoms.

The Centers for Disease Control offer the following guidelines to help you keep your club, business or office healthy during this flu season. Please visit the CDC website for more detailed information on each of the topics below.

- Stay home when sick: Those with flu-like illness should stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, or signs of a fever, without the use of fever-reducing medicines. They should stay home even if they are using anti-viral drugs.
- Separate ill students and staff: Students and staff who appear to have flu-like illness should be sent to a room separate from others until they can be sent home. CDC recommends that they wear a surgical mask, if possible, and that those who care for ill students and staff wear protective gear such as a mask.
- Practice hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette: The new recommendations emphasize the importance of the basic foundations of influenza prevention: stay home when sick, wash hands frequently with soap and water when possible, and cover noses and mouths with a tissue when coughing or sneezing (or a shirt sleeve or elbow if no tissue is available).
- Clean Routinely: School staff should routinely clean areas that students and staff touch often with the cleaners they typically use. Special cleaning with bleach and other non-detergent-based cleaners is not necessary.
- Obtain early treatment of high-risk students and staff: People at high risk for influenza complications who become ill with influenza-like illness should speak with their health care provider as soon as possible. Early treatment with anti-viral medications is very important for people at high risk because it can prevent hospitalizations and deaths. People at high risk include those who are pregnant, have asthma or diabetes, have compromised immune systems, or have neuromuscular diseases.
I hope this information will help to protect you and those in your charge and allow you to have a healthy flu season. ✖