

Preventing Illness this Influenza Season

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Bottom Line at the Top: The influenza vaccine, a healthy lifestyle and avoiding sick people, not supplements and herbs, are the best preventive measures against Influenza.

Influenza A type H1N1 and to a lesser extent type H3N2 and influenza B have arrived in Sacramento County. H1N1 is the one driving people to our emergency rooms and taking over our intensive care units. Death by influenza is scary to watch: The lungs dissolve into a bloody, necrotic soup. The rest of the body's organs, starved of oxygen, fail and death follows.

Influenza is primarily a respiratory disease, usually causing high fever, truck-ran-over-me aches and cough which can progress to severe pneumonia. Infected persons often have a runny nose, fatigue and shortness of breath. Abdominal symptoms, such as vomiting and diarrhea, are part of "the flu."

Influenza is not the only infection making Californians miserable. Another infection making the rounds consists mostly of stomach symptoms like diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. Many also complain of shortness of breath and fever, and lab tests may show some mild liver inflammation. This illness is not killing people and it's not "flu."

Those dying of influenza are not the usual high-risk people, like the elderly, those with chronic illness, infants and pregnant women. Instead, previously healthy, and, for the most part, un-vaccinated people are those on life support.

Too many people eschew vaccination, choosing to rely on who-knows-what to keep them safe from

influenza. Contrary to advice from supplement-pushers, zinc, vitamin C and Echinacea don't prevent or cure colds or influenza. A few studies suggest that zinc lozenges and Echinacea tea might slightly reduce cold symptoms and duration in some individuals. Well-designed trials do not verify their benefit in the majority of people.

Far more effective prevention entails a three-pronged approach - vaccination, avoiding sick people and a healthy lifestyle.

First is vaccination. It's not too late to get the vaccine! It takes about 10-14 days to work. This year's vaccine targets the current H1N1 killer strain, as well as the other strains we are seeing in the community.

The vaccine does not cause influenza. A young or pregnant woman will not transmit the flu to her infant via the vaccine, contrary to ill-conceived rumors. If you have a reaction to the vaccine, it usually means your immune system is already active against the influenza strains in the vaccine, and will be boosted even more with vaccination.

The vaccine is not 100% effective in preventing influenza, but prevents flu in the majority of people who receive it. People's immune systems vary in their ability to respond to vaccines as well as infectious agents, mounting varying degrees of antibody protection after exposure. When a vaccinated person does come down with influenza, illness is less likely to be severe.

The best preventive measure for an at-risk family member, including infants, is vaccination for all that person's contacts - If no one in contact with the at-risk person is sick, he/she won't get the disease.

Avoidance behaviors, like hand washing, staying away from crowds and wearing a mask when exposed to ill people, go a long way to keeping you

healthy and thwarting virus spread. Cover your own coughs and sneezes and run from those who don't. .

Finally, stay healthy by sleeping at least seven hours a day to allow your body to regenerate. Engage in regular moderate (NOT intense) exercise. Eat a prudent diet, with lots of plant foods, adequate protein and enough calories to maintain your ideal body weight. All of these maintain an optimally functioning immune system.

If you do get sick, prescription anti-viral medications such as Tamiflu (oseltamivir) can shorten influenza duration if started within a few days of symptom onset.¶