

Staying healthy during the change of season

By Dr. Sadia R. Chaudry

With the change of season comes an increase of many typical illnesses including the flu, colds, sinusitis, and allergies. It's a busy time with the holidays coming and it's equally important to stay healthy and energized. Below are descriptions of some of these typical illnesses, what you can do to prevent them, and also some ways to best treat them.

First let's talk about influenza, or what is typically referred to as "the flu". Not only is it the most serious of the common winter illnesses which can last up to two weeks but it is also the most dangerous, especially in the young, elderly, and those with chronic conditions. Some complications of the flu can include pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus infection, and ear infections. Symptoms of the flu include sore throat, fever, headache, muscle aches and soreness, congestion, and cough. These tend to be the same symptoms of the common cold, however, the flu symptoms are usually more severe and come on quickly. Some patients come in saying they feel they were "hit by a truck." The flu usually lasts up to a week but can last longer if proper treatment is not administered. Everyone can lower their risk of getting the flu with a flu shot. It's helpful if the entire family get a flu shot to prevent the flu from becoming a "family affair." You can ask your doctor if the flu vaccine is right for you. Other ways to help prevent the flu are wash your hands frequently with warm soapy water for at least 15 seconds, use hand wipes to disinfect areas many people may use, and avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. If you do get the flu take the following steps, get plenty of rest, take medicines to help relieve the symptoms, drink plenty of liquids, and see your doctor at the onset of symptoms because if caught within 48 hours there are antiviral medications that may be prescribed.

While the flu is the most serious winter illness, the cold is the most common. On average, adults get two to four colds per year while children may have a cold six to ten times annually. They usually last about three to seven days. If symptoms of a common cold aren't improving in that time, see your doctor to make sure you don't have a complication of a bacterial infection in your lungs, sinuses or ears. Common cold symptoms start with a sore throat, followed by sneezing and runny nose. In terms of treatment there are many OTC products including decongestants, antihistamines, and cough syrups. Cold prevention is similar to flu prevention which includes good hygiene, using antibacterial products to help disinfect common areas, and avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth.

A couple other common winter illnesses are sinusitis and allergies. Sinusitis includes symptoms such as headache and facial or eye pain, congestion, cough and sore throat. See your doctor if these symptoms last longer than a few days or become more severe. Sinus infections require antibiotic therapy. Allergies include symptoms such as congestion, itchy nose and throat, watery and itchy eyes, get better or worse depending on the immediate environment or circumstances. Treatment for allergies consist of avoidance of things you are allergic to, medications, or allergy injections if very severe.

As you can see, the winter season brings along some typical illnesses which can be prevented or lessened by taking certain steps. A couple of suggestions are to keep medications such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (e.g. Advil), soft tissues, antibacterial wipes and sprays, and fluids for hydration. Also, notice any symptoms you may be having and see your doctor if necessary to determine what is causing the symptoms. Your physician will base their diagnosis on a number of factors including health history, physical examination, and medical test results.

Dr. Sadia R. Chaudry is a Family Physician in Caldwell, NJ. Her address is 526 Bloomfield Avenue and can be reached at (973) 228-1377. Additional information is on her website www.sadiachaudrymd.com