

What to do for the flu



KERRY CROW for The Columbian

Did you know?

■ In an influenza survey conducted by Opinion Research Corp. for Kimberly-Clark Professional, "respiratory etiquette" was clearly expected of co-workers. More than three quarters of employed respondents said it bothered them when sick co-workers sneezed or coughed without covering their faces or touched common surfaces with contaminated hands.

■ In the same survey, the top answer from employees to the question "What should employers do to reduce the spread of germs in the workplace?" was — you guessed it — sending people home at the first signs of illness.

■ The Centers for Disease Control reports there are more than 200,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths from flu complications each year.

■ The germiest areas are not in restrooms. Telephones, doorknobs and keyboards harbor the most bacteria.

Experts recommend a healthy lifestyle as the best defense against the beastly bug

By ANNIE PIERCE RUSUNEN
Columbian staff writer

The flu vaccine may be in short supply this year, but that's no reason to get the chills.

Doctors, nutritionists and naturopaths say there are plenty of ways to ward off sickness and boost immunity as the flu and cold season blows in.

"There is a lot of panic, unfortunately, and what people need to realize is that the flu isn't likely to be any worse this year than in years past. We just have less of the vaccine," said Dr. Jim Little, medical director for Vancouver's Family Physicians Group.

He added that a flu shot is no guarantee that people will be protected from all strains of the flu anyway.

He said the vaccine is important for people in high-risk categories (including adults age 65 and older, children 2 and younger and people with immunity disorders and chronic medical conditions such as heart or lung disease). The average healthy adult, however, has no reason to fret, he said.

Even in years without a vaccine shortage, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that only about 5 to 20 percent of the U.S. population is inoculated for influenza.

"The flu for a healthy adult is an unpleasant thing, but for most people it's not deadly. ... And there are many ways to decrease the chances of getting sick," Little said.

Adds Dee Sandquist, manager of South-

west Washington Medical Center's diabetes and nutrition center: "With all the media attention to the flu vaccine shortage, it's a good time to remind ourselves that the best way to prevent the flu is to eat right, exercise, get plenty of sleep, reduce stress and wash hands frequently."

In addition to following common sense flu-fighting suggestions, such as maintaining good hygiene and drinking plenty of fluids, many people are raiding natural food stores and the vitamin aisles at supermarkets for vitamins, herbs and other natural remedies.

Physicians like Little are a bit skeptical. ("Echinacea isn't likely to hurt you, but will it help you? I'm not so sure," he said).

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Multivitamins, however, can be beneficial for stocking the body up on essential vitamins and minerals, he said.

There are also other natural remedies that naturopaths recommend.

Laura Schissell, a Vancouver naturopath who runs her own business and does consultations at east Vancouver's new Wild Oats store, suggests *Oscillocochinum* (Oscillo for short). The product is said to stimulate the body's immune system to fight off the flu virus and can be found at most natural food stores.

She also recommends echinacea and elderberry, which can be beneficial for upper respiratory ailments, she says. Zinc can fight off sore throats. Vitamin C gives the immune system a charge.

"It's best to stock up on these things before you get sick, so you have them on hand for when you feel (the illness) first coming on," Schissell said. "When you get sick it's hard to want to get out and go to the store."

In addition to herbal options and homeopathic remedies, nutritionists, doctors and

OH FLU-EY

So you've come down with the flu. Drat. Here's some suggestions from doctors and nutritionists for possibly shortening the duration of your body aches, stuffy nose and chills and protecting others from sharing your misery.

- Flu germs spread when a person with the flu sneezes into the air, coughs or touches something with germ-ridden hands. Rather than sneezing or coughing into your hands, then touching a doorknob or shaking someone's hand, hack into your sleeve or a tissue, then throw the tissue away immediately.
- Wash hands vigorously, with soap and water, for at least 15 seconds.
- Don't be a martyr. If you're sick with the flu, don't go to work and expose all of your co-workers. Once the cough and fever subside, it's typically safe to head back to the workplace.
- Get plenty of sleep — the immune system recharges itself while you're getting your zzz's.
- Feed a cold, starve a fever? The answer is neither according to Becky Hand, head dietitian at SparkPeople.com, a health and wellness Web site. The best advice, she said, is to simply follow your appetite. "Starving" an illness is a particularly bad idea since the body needs key nutrients to recover.
- Drink up. Water not only rehydrates the body, but it flushes out the system of poisons and germs.
- Eat lots of phytochemicals. Fruits and veggies, which are full of these immunity boosters ("phyto" means plant), are the best sources of powerful vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

— Annie Pierce Rusunen

naturopaths suggest eating a diet filled with vitamin C-rich foods such as oranges, grapefruit, kiwi, carrots, tomatoes, spinach, broccoli and Brussels sprouts.

Vitamin E (found in nuts, avocados, wheat germ and fatty fish such as tuna) also boosts immunity by creating an abundance of infection-fighting white blood cells.

Garlic is another good bet for its antibacterial and antiviral properties.

Health gurus also say it's a good idea to avoid sugar, fructose and simple carbohydrates (think white bread and crackers) because they can lower immune function.

Regular exercise is also a good cold and flu-fighting habit because it speeds up the heart to pump larger quantities of blood and helps increase the body's virus-killing cells.

Workers who do find themselves battling body aches, runny noses and sore throats this season, however, ought to follow this simple piece of advice — stay home.

Many employers are learning that "presenteeism" is bad for business.

The biggest drain on productivity does not come from flu-related absenteeism, it comes from sick workers who come to work and infect everybody else.

"Everybody is going to be exposed to the flu at some point, but once you know you're sick, people really should stay home," Schissell said. "It's not only a matter of protecting your co-workers — it's a matter of taking care of yourself and getting better."

And besides, as Little said, "Who wants to be sneezed on?"