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Flu Facts

Each year when it is flu season I think of my mother. I wonder if she was ever sick with the flu. She was such a hard working person, always busy raising her eight children, keeping house, sewing clothes, making very good food and she always balanced the checkbook! She did not have time for illness until later in life when a rare blood cancer slowed her down. Did her busy-ness prevent her from becoming ill? I can imagine some truth to that idea. Or did she succumb to the flu and I have no memory of it because she still kept busy and kept the household functioning? I am not sure. Of course, I can recall vividly that my siblings and I became sick. Thank you, Mama, for giving up your bed to keep us near and thank you for always being there.

It's still flu season and mothers and fathers are still at work taking care of themselves and their families. While the parents' hearts are in the right place, how to care for the flu correctly is not always immediately evident. Every year there is confusion about the term and the condition of "flu", which is short for influenza. The flu is caused by a virus, as is a cold. A cold, however, comes on gradually usually beginning with a sore throat and the sniffles. The flu can come on very rapidly and involves fevers, fatigue, aches and a dry cough. While high fevers may bring on nausea and sometimes cause vomiting, the flu is primarily an upper respiratory illness. The "stomach bug" is not the flu. There is no such thing as the stomach flu.

While the flu and the cold are viral and will not be shortened or reduced or cured in any way by an antibiotic, a viral infection can be followed by secondary bacterial infection. If the original dry cough becomes a phlegm-producing cough and the mucous turns from yellow to green or is rusty colored, the patient may now have a sinus infection or bronchitis. Loosen the phlegm with lots of clear liquids and simple old-fashioned Guaifenesin, an expectorant that loosens phlegm and increases the lubrication of your lungs, allowing for a productive cough and decreased congestion.

It is best to care for the flu at home with lots of hand washing, sanitizing of surfaces and social distancing. Social distancing is the art of keeping an arm's length away from people so that coughed-out flu-containing droplets have the chance to drop toward the floor, instead of into someone's face. And, of course, always cough into the elbow, not a hanky or the hand.

A very real benefit of treating the flu at home is the avoidance of other sick people and the keeping of your illness away from well people. However, it is time to seek medical assistance when the fever is over 103 for adults, 102 for three month to five year olds or 100.4 for infants three months or younger, it lasts longer than three days, when there is pain in the sinuses, ears and/or chest, when mucous turns green or rusty or bloody or when the neck is sore and stiff.

We begin to shed the virus a day before we show any symptoms and for about a week after the symptoms begin. As soon as the symptoms begin, the flu patient should be isolated as much as possible. To further prevent the spread of the disease, the healthy people in the family should consider themselves quarantined as much as possible. Isolation is for the ill; they both begin with the letter "I". The healthy are separated by quarantine to further prevent the chance of the illness spreading. This means that all those hardworking important people out there should not return to work one or two days after becoming ill, even if they think are feeling well enough to manage getting some work done. They are still shedding the virus and, therefore, spreading the illness.

Understanding the flu, how it is spread and how to prevent it from spreading will save lives when a pandemic flu arrives. A pandemic flu is one that is new, one that we do not have a vaccine

prepared for, rapidly becomes widespread and is deadly. It is a natural cycle occurring every few decades. We are overdue one.

I recall conversing with a woman in Quincy when I was a young woman and she not much older than I am now. She recounted how her mother told her stories of the great pandemic flu of 1918. The most vivid image impressed upon her was that of carts going down the street, asking if you had any dead people that day. People were dying so rapidly, there was not always time or the appropriate conditions, from a sanitary viewpoint, for individual burials.

Unfortunately, I have heard that federal funding for preparing for our next pandemic will be drastically cut next year. Boards of Health, public health nurses and hospitals have been scrambling to plan emergency dispensing sites and plan for surge capacity. These plans have actually been ordered. They are mandated deliverables. It is difficult to avoid discouragement and cynicism when you repeatedly see the sticks of mandates paired with the promised carrots of funding, only to have all the mandates and funding changed, rearranged, reduced and cut.

So, carry on we do and we learn to take care of ourselves the best we can. Learning and practicing the flu vocabulary now will help us out immensely when the pandemic hits. Some of the vocabulary for those flu related flashcards would include: Dehydration, fever, fluids, influenza, isolate, pandemic, quarantine, sanitize, social distancing, vaccine, viral vs. bacterial and washing.

Thank you to our State Department of Public Health for producing the booklet “Flu: What You Can Do”. The booklet was helpful in writing this column. It is available for free at your local board of health.

Thank you to mothers for taking care and keeping us going.

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