

GROWING UP

Does Achoo! Mean the Flu?

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

Achoo! echoes down the hallway of your house. As a parent, you reflexively grab for a tissue box and expect your little one to come down the hall. As your child comes into view, you can immediately sense that she is not feeling well. This is confirmed when she says, "I feel bad" and is shaking.

This is the point where Dr. Mom or Dr. Dad begins. You begin to think of hundreds of possibilities from what your child last ate to who your child has recently been in contact with and whether they were sick. You might even get out the thermometer to check her temperature.

In the winter, part of your thinking will center on the question of whether your child has the flu or a cold. Even though we often think that sneezing and congestion are instant indicators of the flu, they aren't. Rather a child who has the flu often has a fever, aches, chills and fatigue. These symptoms usually occur quite quickly.

A child with the flu is never a very pleasant experience for the parent or the child. If asked, parents and children would love to never get the flu. The good news is that there are several preventative steps that can be taken to minimize the chances of getting the flu. The first step is to get the flu vaccine when it is offered each fall. The vaccine changes every year to accommodate the new flu strains that are going around, so plan on getting the vaccination each fall. Children under the age of 2 will have to receive the shot for the vaccine while older children have the option of getting the flu mist. This flu season, the main flu strain is still the 2009 H1N1 virus.

A second step to take to minimize getting the flu is to keep your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth. Those tricky little viruses are just looking for an opening to get into you. If you can't avoid those areas, wash your hands frequently to eliminate the virus from your hands.

If the worst happens and your child does get the flu, it is time to teach them the importance of covering her mouth when coughing or sneezing. As a parent, it is important for you to teach them to cough or sneeze into the crook of her arm. Even when your child learns this technique, you need to remind her that raising her arm and coughing above or below her arm is not really helpful. If this is all too difficult for your child, just have her cough into her hands and then wash them.

If the flu persists, it is probably time to see your doctor. The doctor can prescribe anti-viral medications that can help. If your child starts to display more significant symptoms like difficulty breathing, signs of dehydration, lethargy, persistent vomiting, chest or abdominal pain, or flu symptoms that seemed to have gone away and then returned, seek immediate help.

As the saying goes, ...and this shall pass and so will the flu. Make sure to keep your child home for at least 24 hrs. after she becomes symptom free so we can avoid passing the flu on to other children.

For more resources on the flu, see:

www.flufacts.com

www.google.org/flutrends

www.cdc.gov/flu/

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