

## Fighting the Flu

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Flu is an illness of the nose, throat, and lungs which is caused by a constantly changing virus. The so-called flu season usually hits a peak from December through February although the flu virus can be active at any time during the year. The flu is a very dangerous illness for everyone, but it is especially dangerous for children and older adults, because it can lead to further complications such as pneumonia. In fact, 90% of those who die each year from the flu are older adults.

Flu is spread from contact within six feet of an infected person or by touching anything that has the virus on its surface such as a door handle. The infected person can pass the virus on even before he or she feels any symptoms, and the contagious period can last as long as a week after the symptoms appear.

What can we do to protect ourselves from the flu? First, it is recommended that everyone above the age of six months get the flu vaccine every year. A good many people erroneously believe that the flu can be contracted from a flu shot or from the vaccine nasal spray. The flu shot is composed of dead viruses and the nasal spray contains highly weakened viruses, so it is highly unlikely that the flu can be contracted through either means. Also, the vaccine is composed of from three to four strains of the flu virus which have been predicted to be most prevalent for that particular year. A person can get the flu even after receiving the vaccine because he or she may have been exposed to a strain of the virus which was not included in the vaccine.

Antiviral drugs such as *Tamiflu* and *Relenza* cannot protect a person from getting the flu, but they can make a person who has the flu feel better faster. However, always consult your doctor before using these medications. Remember also that, because the flu is a viral infection, antibiotics will not have any effect in treating the symptoms.

Finally, constant hand washing is a must if a person is serious about protecting himself or herself. Also, several studies have shown that plain soap and water is just as effective as using anti-bacterial soaps in preventing both colds and the flu.

Tri-Community South EMS has been proactive in fighting the flu virus for the past several years by providing free flu shots for our residents. Call 412-831-3710 for information if you are interested.