Do you have the flu?

The common cold and influenza (commonly called flu) are both respiratory infections caused by viruses. But the flu is considered more serious because of more severe symptoms that can lead to pneumonia and even death in persons who have other chronic diseases.

With both the cold and flu, you may experience a stuffy nose, sore throat, and sneezing. Tiredness, fever, chills, headache, and major aches and pains may mean you have the flu. Neither the common cold nor flu need to be treated with antibiotics. Consult your doctor if your symptoms get worse or persist for more than a few days.

One of the best ways to prevent flu infection is to get a flu vaccine from your doctor. A study in the March 10, 1999, issue of JAMA shows that the vaccine is 88% effective in preventing influenza type A infection and 89% effective in preventing influenza type B infection. A second study in the same issue shows that it may be especially advisable for certain groups of people, such as women younger than age 65 with certain chronic medical conditions, to get an annual flu vaccine.

WHO SHOULD GET A FLU SHOT?

- All people aged 65 years or older
- People of any age with chronic diseases of the heart, lung or kidneys, diabetes, compromised immune systems, severe forms of anemia, or asthma
- Residents of nursing homes and other facilities where patients with chronic medical conditions live
- Children or teenagers who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy and who therefore may be at risk for developing Reye syndrome (a neurologic disorder characterized by brain or liver damage) after a flu infection
- Women who will be in the second or third trimester of pregnancy during the flu season
- Health care professionals and volunteers who work with high-risk patients
- People who live in a household with a person who fits into any of the categories above

WHAT TO EXPECT:
The flu shot contains no live virus, so you cannot get the flu from the shot. In the United States, flu season usually occurs from about November to April, and the best time to get the vaccine is between September and mid-November. Flu viruses continually change, so it is important that you receive the flu vaccine every year. Most people do not experience side effects from the flu vaccine; however, some people may feel sore at the vaccination site, and other minor, uncommon side effects include headache or low-grade fever for about a day after vaccination.

WHAT IS INFLUENZA?

Influenza is a highly contagious respiratory infection. It is spread person-to-person through infectious droplets, such as when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It causes symptoms that include headache, chills, and dry cough, followed by body aches, fever, nasal congestion, and sore throat. Symptoms usually appear within 2 to 4 days of being infected, and a person is considered contagious for another 3 to 4 days after symptoms appear. There are 3 types of influenza viruses (types A, B, and C), with type A being the most prevalent and associated with the most serious epidemics.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
  Building 31, Room 7A50
  31 Center Drive, MSC 2520
  Bethesda, MD 20892-2520 or
  www.niaid.nih.gov
- American Lung Association
  800/LUNG-USA or
  www.lungusa.org

INFORM YOURSELF:
To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA’s Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. A JAMA Patient Page on the common cold was published on June 24, 1998.