

- Influenza

Tips on how to prepare for the flu season

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JUNE in the Philippines not only marks the beginning of the rainy season but the flu season as well.



Influenza, commonly known as flu or the common cold, has always been prevalent from the start of June until the end of November.

According to Dr. Mayla Veronica Madrigal, a certified family medicine doctor and occupational health physician, there are different factors that explain how we acquire this viral infection.

“Once our immune system is depressed, we are susceptible to common infections,” says Dr. Madrigal. “Flu is very common in our country. Basically, there are several viruses that can cause flu that are existing in our country. Since they are already present, “plus if our immune system is brought down to a level that pre-disposes us to develop conditions, that can lead us to develop the flu.”

Moreover, she explains that the virus is transmitted more commonly through droplets spreading, especially when we talk, cough, and sneeze, among others.

“Once we are exposed to the person who has an infection, the incubation period or the onset of the illness from exposure would be one to three days,” Dr. Madrigal explains. “Once we catch that, the virus will attack our nose, our throat, and our lungs. And that would explain our symptoms when we have a common cold.”

Symptoms of the flu include fever, cough, runny nose, and nasal congestion. For Dr. Madrigal, the virus should immediately be treated once the patient feels these symptoms.

“If we don’t treat this condition, the symptoms can still abate during the second to the third week (of infection), especially if we have a good immune system,” she expounds. “So, in the Philippines, it’s very common in the months of June to November. It’s very important for us to be prepared prior to the beginning of the season.”

“The key here, to avoid the common cold this season, is to have a strong immune system. And we know that certain lifestyles and habits favor the immune system,” she adds.

Dr. Madrigal shares some tips on how to prepare for the coming flu season, to help protect ourselves and our loved ones. Have a good and colorful nutrition.

To help our immune system do its job against flu, we must ensure that we take the proper nutrients needed to help its function.

Firstly, Dr. Madrigal said we should eat fresh, colorful produce as it contains high amounts of vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals, antioxidants, and essential amino acids.

“For example, red food like tomato, strawberries, and red beans may contain Vitamins C and A, and even antioxidants,” she says. “Tomato also contains lycopene, which is also good for the heart. Another one, yellow and orange fruits like carrots, squash, and banana are also loaded with Vitamins A & C, and also potassium which is an electrolyte that can also protect our heart.”

“White food, on the other hand, like mushroom, keeps our cholesterol at a minimum level,” she points out. “Purple food, like eggplants, purple grapes, helps our kidney function as well as our memory function, thus promoting healthy aging.

Green food, like dark green and leafy vegetables, is also heart

protective, as it contains potassium, and Vitamin K which can keep our vision healthy and help us have strong bones and teeth.”

Moreover, when it comes to meat, Dr. Madrigal says we should always choose fresh over frozen products. “Fresh products contain more nutrients, compared to the frozen ones.”

Proper hydration, through drinking eight to 10 glasses of water daily, can also help protect ourselves from flu, as well as drinking warm tea. “The flu season is kind of cold and it helps keep us warm when we have something warm to drink [like tea],” shares Dr. Madrigal.

Lastly, Dr. Madrigal suggests following the food guide promoted by the Department of Health called the *Pinggang Pinoy*, which is used to convey the right proportions of food groups on a per-meal basis, meeting the energy and nutrient needs of the Filipino adults.

“Fifty percent of the plate should contain the glow foods, while the 25 percent should come from protein-rich foods, like fish and other meats, then the other 25 percent, to complete the 100 percent, would include foods rich in carbohydrates,” Dr. Madrigal elaborates.

Keep fit. Build a healthy regimen of physical activities that is not too strenuous. “We can utilize our body weight in performing sprint interval exercises, not necessarily using heavy gym equipment unless our purpose is weight building,” she explains. “But if we just want to keep our immune system at par so that we could prevent contracting infections, then sprint interval exercises are really good.”

Observe proper hours of sleep. Having the right amount of sleep can also help protect ourselves from flu. Seven to eight hours of sleep is key to recuperating and rejuvenating our bodies after a long, tiring day.

Veering our body away from sleep can cause fatigue and lack of energy, weakening the immune system and allowing viruses, like flu, to enter our body.

“We also need to respect our body. If our body feels any pain, tiredness, or exhaustion, then we need to rest,” notes Dr. Madrigal. “Take a nap during the day or have a good night’s sleep.”

Mindfulness is key. Effects on our immune system have also been linked to psychological stresses. Dr. Madrigal says that feeling stress and anxiety depresses the immune system, making us prone to infections.

She suggests practicing some relaxation techniques and breathing exercises, which can all be done before sleep or upon waking up in the morning.

“Practice this cycle of four-second inhalation through the nose and then seven-second holding of breath, followed by an eight-second exhalation from the mouth,” she says. “We can repeat this cycle for several minutes.”

There are studies showing that there are psychological and physiological changes in terms of the brain and the body interaction, specially during these meditative or relaxing practices.

“They are stress-relieving and they can keep us calm. When we are calm, we can think properly, we can concentrate properly, and we can plan our lives for the next day,” she explains.

Get your shot. Dr. Madrigal explains the importance of getting flu vaccines, as well as taking medicines, various supplements, and home remedies as protection from viral infections.

When it comes to the flu vaccine, since the flu season is around June to November, she believes it is more beneficial when we get it from April to May.

“There are more lineages of Influenzavirus B that are present in our country. Therefore, in some studies, they say that quadrivalent vaccine over a trivalent vaccine could be more beneficial,” adds Dr. Madrigal.

Quadrivalent vaccines are designed to protect us against two strains of Influenza A and two strains of Influenza B. On the other hand, a trivalent vaccine protects us from two strains of Influenza A but only one strain of Influenza B.

Apart from the vaccine, medicines are also important when it comes to dealing with the flu. Dr. Madrigal suggests keeping paracetamol, carbocisteine, ambroxol, and lagundi in our medicine cabinets.

“I suggest that we have paracetamol as fever is one of the symptoms of flu. We can also have carbocisteine because, in studies, it is known to reduce the duration of cough among children, aged two to seven years old. It also helps in secretion in children three to eight years old and it also has an excellent safety profile,” she says.

“Another medicine is ambroxol because it promotes mucus clearance. And there’s also capsule, according to studies, is very good for relieving acute cough,” she informs us.

If you don’t have these medicines and supplements, Dr. Madrigal cites some effective home remedies that you can do as alternative cures for flu.

“Honey reduces cough duration and severity. Also, citrus fruits can increase vitamin C in our body,” she enumerates. “When it comes to the safety profile, food is much safer than medicine. Therefore, if we think of home remedies, we might think first of food over medicine, thus there are some foods that can be considered helpful when we have symptoms like cough and cold.”

“We can boil four grams of fresh ginger with orange peels in water, and then we drink that to boost our immune system. For fever and colds, fresh ginger can also help us if it’s boiled with sugar and honey,” she adds.