Influenza, “the flu”, is a viral illness of the respiratory tract caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms can be mild or severe and include fever, headache, sore throat, tiredness/fatigue, muscle aches, runny nose/congestion, and cough. Younger children, especially infants and toddlers, can have vomiting and diarrhea. Typical symptoms last 5-7 days with the cough lasting up to 2 weeks!

The common cold is a bit like the flu but usually much less severe with mild fever, little fatigue or headache, and no muscle aches and shorter duration of illness. Complications of the flu (bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, ear/sinus infections, worsening of chronic medical condition, and rarely encephalitis or death) are more common in young children and those with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, asthma, congenital heart disease, or muscle weakness problems.

The best way to protect against the flu is to get a flu shot and take steps such as wash hands frequently, staying away from sick people or crowded places, keep hands away from face to prevent the spread of the virus. However, should your child get the flu then make sure he/she gets plenty of rest and drinks lots of fluids. You can give your child acetaminophen or ibuprofen (not on an empty stomach!) for the fever or pain to make them comfortable, but these medications will not resolve the symptoms. Aspirin should not be given. Cough and cold medications or flu medications should not be used as they often have side effects and are not helpful. Sometimes a prescription medication can be given to prevent the flu or lessen the severity and shorten the course/infectiousness of the flu but it must be started within 24-48 hours of the onset of the illness. You would need to see your child’s doctor for this.

Most of us, including our children, will get better and not need anything more than fluids, rest, and other comfort measures. However, if your child seems very sick you should consult with your pediatrician.

You should also contact your pediatrician right away if your child:
- Has a fever that lasts longer than 4-5 days
- Has a fever higher than 104F
- Has a rash with the fever
- Has difficulty breathing or fast/hard breathing
- Is not intermittenly interactive with you or is so fussy that she/he does not want to be held
- Is not urinating very much or is drinking much less than usual
- Is acting unusual/confused, has a severe headache or persistent vomiting
- Seems better and then gets sick again
- Has a chronic medical condition that seems to be getting worse
- Children under 3 months of age

The best protection against the flu is to have EVERYONE in your family over 6mo of age vaccinated each year. This season’s flu vaccine (2010-2011) will contain the H1N1 strain as well as 2 other flu strains (H3N3, B). We need to get a flu vaccine EVERY year because the flu virus constantly changes and develops new strains of the virus. Even if not a “perfect match” getting the flu vaccine can provide some protection.

Dr. Brenda Foley is accepting new patients at Pediatric Health Associates at Bedford, 472-5860.

The Elliot
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