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Fighting the flu requires prevention, treatment

by Ellen T. Lawson, MD, Medical Director, Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care

The United States is experiencing a particularly bad flu season this year, so it’s important to know how to protect yourself from this sickness and how to treat yourself in the unfortunate case you get it.

The flu is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by different viruses. It often starts suddenly and may include symptoms such as a fever, chills, runny nose, muscle aches, sore throat, headaches, fatigue, diarrhea or vomiting. Some people recover in a few days while others may be ill for weeks. If not treated properly, the flu can lead to ear and sinus infections, bronchitis, or pneumonia, the latter of which may require hospital admission and is potentially fatal.

Certain people are at higher risk for serious illness from the flu. These include children under 5; pregnant women; severely obese individuals; adults 65 and older and their caretakers; and anyone with asthma, chronic respiratory illness, heart disease or diabetes. Those with a weakened immune system from illness or immunosuppressant drugs are also at high risk.

The first line of defense from the flu is getting an annual vaccination, which is recommended for everyone over 6 months of age, particularly those who fall into the high-risk categories mentioned above. You can get a flu vaccine from your doctor’s office, the local health department, and some pharmacies and grocery stores. Even this far into the season it’s still worth getting a vaccine, as you’ll develop immunity in two to three weeks after the shot.

Since the flu is virus-born, it’s spread by droplets dispersed by sneezing and coughing. These droplets can spread up to six feet away and infect anyone who inhales them or touches a contaminated surface and then their mouth or nose. So, sanitize your hands often by washing them or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and disinfect surfaces at home or at work that sick people may have come in contact with.

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If you develop symptoms of the flu, you should see a physician. If you test positive, they can treat you with an antiviral medication that will shorten the course of the flu by one to two days and help prevent serious complications. The antiviral medications work best if they’re given within the first 48 hours of illness but may be started later for those at high risk for complications or those who are very sick.

You can also speed up the healing process by staying home, getting lots of rest, and drinking plenty of water and other clear liquids. And be sure to avoid close contact with others so you don’t spread this unsavory illness around any more than it already has been.

For more information on Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care, please call (828) 210-2121 or visit www.urgentcares.org.

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MEDIA CONTACT
Sharon Owen, Executive Assistant/Fundraising Coordinator
Sisters of Mercy Services
sharon@somsc.org • (828) 281-2598

ABOUT SISTERS OF MERCY URGENT CARE
Established in 1985, the locally owned, not-for-profit Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care provides fast, affordable treatment of non-life-threatening illnesses and injuries at a fraction of the time and cost of an ER visit. Its doctors, nurses and support staff provide more than 50,000 service visits each year, including more than $1.5 million in care for patients who are underinsured or uninsured. To date, Sisters of Mercy has served more than one million patients throughout Western North Carolina. The organization is a division of Sisters of Mercy Services, and it receives funding from the McAuley MERCY Foundation, a 501(c)3 charitable organization. For more information, please call (828) 210-2121 or visit www.urgentcares.org.