Fight the Flu
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Flu - an unwelcome winter visitor

Winter brings dark evenings, cold weather and frozen pipes! It is also a time when we suffer more coughs and colds and there is the reappearance of another seasonal visitor, the unpleasant and much more serious illness, influenza or flu. Flu is not new; it has been around for thousands of years. The worst outbreak in recent history was the epidemic of 1918-1919, when over 200,000 people died in this country alone. More recently, we have had the 'Asian' (1957), 'Hong Kong' (1968) and 'Red' (1977) flu to contend with. It is estimated that even in non-epidemic years, up to 4,000 people die from flu-related illnesses, and some years it is many more than this.

What is flu?

Flu is a virus which first attacks the cells in your respiratory tract. Whilst it can be caught at any time of the year, the most common time is between December and March. Unlike other common viruses such as chickenpox or measles, there is not just one type of flu virus but several different types. These types themselves change frequently. So getting flu once doesn't mean that you won't get it again.

How is flu spread?

Flu is spread through the droplets released into the air when a sufferer sneezes or coughs. You can catch the virus by breathing in these droplets or by having contact with surfaces where they have settled. Someone who has flu is usually infectious for about a week.
What are the symptoms of flu?
The typical symptoms of flu are a high temperature (103°F or 39.4°C) with:
- chills
- a cough
- sore throat
- general weakness
- aching muscles in the back, arms or legs

Often you may also have a headache which might be made worse when you move your eyes.

The major difference between flu and the common cold is that you may be literally 'knocked flat' by flu and unable to do anything but go to bed until the worst of the illness has passed.

The main symptoms of flu generally last for about seven days. For some people, however, complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia will delay recovery.

Once the severe illness has passed, you may find that you still feel tired and unwell. This could last for several weeks.
Are you at risk from flu?

Anyone can get flu. Most people overcome the illness after a recovery period, but older people and people who are not well to begin with are more prone to serious complications that can follow a bout of flu.

Those who are considered to be at a 'high risk' from flu include:

- **people aged 65 and over**
- people with lung disease such as bronchitis, asthma and emphysema
- people with heart disease
- people with kidney disease
- people with diabetes
- people whose immune system is weakened by disease or treatment
- residents of residential/nursing homes or other long-stay care accommodation

The Department of Health recommends that everyone included in these 'high risk' groups should have a flu vaccination every year.

**Prevention is better than cure**

Flu can largely be prevented by vaccination. Vaccines are available every year from October, before flu usually strikes. Unlike some vaccines that last for
years or life, you must get a flu jab every year to stay protected.

The flu vaccine prevents the illness in about three quarters of those vaccinated. Even if you do catch flu, there is evidence that you will have it more mildly and with fewer complications than if you had not been vaccinated. Modern flu vaccines have few side effects - some people get a sore arm for a day or two.

Whilst anyone can ask their doctor for a flu jab, the Department of Health specifically recommends vaccination of those people who are in a 'high risk' group. **If you are 65 or over** or think you may fall into one of the other 'high risk' categories, discuss flu vaccination with your doctor or practice nurse.

**Flu vaccine for people aged 65 and over**

Complications, such as pneumonia or severe bronchitis, can follow a bout of flu. The risk of experiencing these complications increases with age. This is why flu vaccination is recommended for people aged 65 and over. **If you are 65 or over, talk to your doctor or practice nurse about vaccination.**

**Flu in care homes**

Elderly people living in residential or nursing homes are at greater risk because of the ease and speed at which the flu virus can spread through homes where many 'high risk' residents live together. For this reason, the Department of