



CLIPPINGS a weekly column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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For Immediate Release

The 'Flu' or Food Poisoning? And What to Do About It

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Influenza (often referred to as the 'flu') is caused by a virus that infects the respiratory tract (the nose, throat and lungs). Common symptoms include headache and muscle aches, fever, extreme fatigue and respiratory symptoms such as cough, nasal congestion, sore throat and runny or stuffy nose. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends everyone 6 months of age and older get an influenza vaccine every season.

Food poisoning (gastroenteritis) is carried to food or food contact surfaces (such as a plate or silverware) by food, water or by someone handling food or dishes. Common symptoms include stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fatigue and fever. Food poisoning causes an estimated 48 million illnesses, 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths per year in the United States, according to the CDC.

People often refer to 'stomach flu' when they have food poisoning, but it is not the 'flu' and there is no vaccine for it. Remember, a flu shot is effective against influenza (a respiratory illness), not food poisoning. Handling food safely and good handwashing are the number one prevention steps against food poisoning.

A virus called norovirus is the most common cause of food poisoning. It causes intense vomiting and/or diarrhea for 24 to 48 hours. It is very contagious and can make people sick within 1 to 3 days. November through April is the time when norovirus is the most common, according to the CDC. Norovirus can spread quickly through people that have been in close quarters (a family gathering, schools, dorms, fraternities, sororities, cruise ships, etc.). There is no treatment for norovirus, so prevention is critical.

Steps to Prevent Norovirus:

1. Frequent thorough handwashing with soap and water:
 - after using the restroom or changing a diaper.
 - before eating.
 - before cooking or handling food.
 - Hand sanitizers (alcohol-based) can be used after handwashing but should not be used in place of handwashing. Hand sanitizers are not as effective at removing norovirus particles from hands as washing your hands with soap and water.

2. Don't prepare food for others while sick (while you have vomiting and/or diarrhea) and for at least two days after symptoms have ended.
3. Clean and Disinfect surfaces where vomiting and diarrhea have occurred.
 - Wear rubber or disposable gloves. Wipe the area well with paper towels to remove visible particles. Wash well with warm soapy water.
 - Disinfect with a solution of ½-cup bleach to ½-gallon (8 cups) water. Wipe the cleaned area with this solution and allow it to sit on the affected surface for at least 5 minutes. Then clean the entire area again with soap and hot water.
 - Take out the trash, clean the soiled laundry and wash hands well. Change clothes after the clean-up is done.
4. Immediately remove and wash clothes or linens that have been contaminated with vomiting and/or diarrhea.
 - Wear gloves while handling these items and wash hands after and often.
 - Wash with laundry detergent and the hottest water setting available.
 - Dry at the highest heat setting.

Influenza and norovirus can be serious, especially for high risk populations such as infants and preschool age children, older adults and anyone with a weakened immune system. Take every possible step to prevent these illnesses and seek treatment as needed.

Source: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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