Communicable Diseases Series

Seasonal Influenza

Causative agents

Seasonal influenza is an acute illness of the respiratory tract caused by influenza viruses. It is usually more common in periods from January to March and from July to August in Hong Kong. Three types of seasonal influenza viruses are recognised to cause human infection, namely A, B and C. Influenza A viruses can further be subtyped and influenza A (H1N1)pdm09 virus is one of them. In the spring of 2009, influenza A (H1N1)pdm09 virus emerged to cause illness in human and resulted in a pandemic in mid 2009. Influenza A (H1N1)pdm09 virus has now become one of the seasonal influenza strains worldwide.

Clinical features

For healthy individuals, seasonal influenza is usually self-limiting with recovery in 2 – 7 days. Symptoms may include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, muscle pain, fatigue and headache; some may also have vomiting and diarrhoea. Cough is often severe and prolonged but fever and other symptoms generally resolve in 5 – 7 days. However, influenza can be a serious illness to the weak and frail or elderly people, and may be complicated by bronchitis, chest infection or even death.

Mode of transmission

Influenza viruses mainly spread through droplets when infected people cough, sneeze or talk. The infection may also spread by direct contact with the secretions of infected persons.

Incubation period

Usually around 1 – 4 days

Infectious period

Infected persons may pass the viruses to other people 1 day before and up to 5 – 7 days after they develop symptoms. The period may be even longer in young children or severely immunocompromised persons.

Management

- Have adequate rest and drink plenty of water
- Refrain from work or school when having symptoms of influenza
- Seek medical advice if symptoms persist or deteriorate
- Antibiotics which target bacterial infection but not viral infection will not cure influenza or make recovery faster
- Antiviral agents may reduce severity and duration of illness but must be used under doctor’s prescription

Prevention

Seasonal influenza vaccination

- The vaccine is safe and effective in preventing seasonal influenza and its complications
- Influenza can cause serious illness in high-risk individuals and even healthy persons. Given that seasonal influenza vaccines are safe and effective, all persons aged 6 months or above except those with known contraindications are recommended to receive seasonal influenza vaccine for personal protection
- Usually, it is suggested that vaccination should be received in autumn every year. About 2 weeks after vaccination, the body will develop a sufficient level of antibodies to protect against influenza virus infection

Personal and environmental hygiene

- Wash hands frequently with liquid soap and water, especially before touching the mouth, nose or eyes, or after touching public installations such as handrails or door knobs
- When hands are not visibly soiled, clean them with 70 – 80% alcohol-based handrub as an effective alternative
- Cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, and wash hands thoroughly afterwards
- Dispose of soiled tissue paper properly in a lidded rubbish bin
- Put on a surgical mask when having respiratory symptoms
- Maintain good indoor ventilation
- When influenza is prevalent, avoid going to crowded or poorly ventilated public places; high-risk individuals may consider putting on surgical masks while in such places

In addition, members of the public should also maintain a balanced diet, exercise regularly, take adequate rest, do not smoke and avoid overstress.

Centre for Health Protection Website www.chp.gov.hk
24-Hour Health Education Hotline of the Department of Health 2833 0111
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