How to Handle MS and the Flu

by ABIGAIL BUDD

MS and the Flu

It always makes me raise an eyebrow when people have a day off work and say they've had the flu. Colleagues get coughs and sneezes and confuse a bad cold with flu all the time, but the real, genuine flu is a nasty business.

Having a chronic condition like multiple sclerosis (MS) makes us particularly vulnerable to flu as it can amplify all our symptoms and bring us to our knees. In this article, I'll look at what the flu is, how MS and the flu affect each other, and how we can protect ourselves.

Is It a Cold or the Flu?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the flu can cause mild to severe illness and can sometimes lead to death. Flu is different from a cold as it comes on suddenly rather than gradually and people can feel all or some of the following symptoms:

- Fever
- A cough
- A sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body aches
- A headache
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea or vomiting

The flu will feel a lot worse than a cold and will usually last close to two weeks.

Can the Flu Make MS Symptoms Worse?

People with weakened immune systems will be at greater risk of flu so we need to be careful. Disease-modifying therapies can lower our immune systems making us more prone to flu than the general population.

Those of us who experience heat sensitivity will find our MS symptoms feel much worse when we get flu due to the fever and chills that can come with it. Increased fatigue will make us feel worse than usual and I can only imagine the impact body aches would have on mobility.

It is also thought that flu infections can lead to a worsening of symptoms, trigger a relapse and lead to worsening disability so it's wise for us to know how to protect ourselves and stay as healthy as possible.

MS and the Flu: The Prevention Tools You Need

Prevention is always better than cure so we're lucky there are flu vaccines widely available.

In the UK, The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommend that a flu vaccine is routinely offered free to people who are at risk of severe health complications following infection from flu. These include the elderly, young children, pregnant women and people with long-term health conditions like MS.

I receive a text from my doctor inviting me to have a flu vaccine and most years I try and make the appointment but I'm guilty of forgetting sometimes. We're lucky to have mostly free healthcare in the UK and I don't know how this works in other countries. It's worth checking with your healthcare team to see if a flu vaccine is available to you.

The flu vaccine consists of three or four selected strains of the flu virus that are thought to be most likely to cause the disease in the upcoming season and these are injected into the muscles, so we develop our own antibodies.

Some people report side effects such as soreness of the injection site as well as mild, flu-like symptoms but these usually only last a few days and can be treated at home. I've never experienced an adverse reaction when I've had the flu shot, but everyone's different.

It's also worth noting that some flu shots aren't suitable for those of us on Lemtrada (alemtuzumab) and these people should have the inactivated flu shot, six weeks before receiving their infusion. Otherwise, flu vaccines are considered to be safe for MSers.

NICE also recommends that carers get the flu shot to prevent passing on the flu virus.

There are also common-sense ways we can reduce our chances of getting the flu. We can eat healthily, get plenty of sleep and make sure we wash our hands to avoid spreading next germs around.

How to Fight the Flu With MS

It's still possible to get flu even after taking precautions but the following tips can help you feel better.

- Rest and sleep.
- Keep warm.
- Take paracetamol and/or ibuprofen to lower your temperature and treat aches and pains (particularly important if you suffer from heat sensitivity).
- Drink plenty of water.
- Speak to your pharmacy about other treatments, making sure you don't exceed the daily dose of paracetamol.

I've never experienced MS and the flu together, as I'm told I'd remember if I did! I have experienced other illnesses though and know how hard it can be just getting to the bathroom when you feel awful. I hope I never experience it.