

## **PNEUMONIA AND FLU: NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT**

Flu season typically starts in the fall and peaks in January or February but it can start as early as October and continue until May.

**THE FLU:** Influenza (flu) is a highly contagious respiratory illness that is caused by the influenza virus or one of many types of influenza viruses. The flu can lead to complications including dehydration, sinus infections, ear infections, pneumonia, and more.

The flu is spread from person to person by coughing and sneezing. Sometimes people become infected by touching something that has been contaminated by a flu virus and then touching their mouth or nose. Anyone can get the flu. Individuals are at greater risk of developing complications of the flu if they have a lung disease or other serious illness.

People who have challenges communicating their needs may not be able to tell you how they feel, so the caregiver has to recognize the symptoms of the flu. Caregivers should be on the lookout for any physical or behavioral changes that may indicate one or more of the following flu symptoms:

- Fever, usually high.
- Headache signs may include general irritability, rubbing of the head or eyes, or . . . .
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat (difficulty eating)
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches.



**PNEUMONIA:** Pneumonia has multiple causes. One form of pneumonia is viral pneumonia and it is most commonly caused by the same virus that causes the flu. When pneumonia is caused by a bacteria, it is most commonly pneumococcal pneumonia. Pneumonia is a serious disease that kills thousands of people every year and causes many more to be hospitalized.

You can get pneumonia in several ways -- by breathing infected air particles, as a complication of the flu or as a complication of another illness. Anyone can develop pneumonia but people who have a cold or the flu are at higher risk as are people who have problems swallowing, routinely cough up food, are frequently constipated, or have problems walking or moving around. People with chronic long-term illnesses, especially illnesses involving the lungs are at special risk of developing pneumonia.

As with the flu, people who have challenges communicating their needs may not be able to tell you how they feel, so the caregiver should be on the lookout for any physical or behavioral changes that may indicate a symptom of pneumonia, including

- Fever or shaking chills
- Shortness of breath (having trouble breathing) breathing in short breaths
- Pain with deep breathing or coughing
- Headache and muscle pain
- Cough may include bloody spit
- Weakness
- Confusion due to limited oxygen supply to the brain.

**PREVENTING PNEUMONIA AND THE FLU:** Caregivers and others who help support individuals with a developmental disabilities can play an important role in reducing serious illnesses and prevent death from pneumonia or flu.

The single best way to protect an individual is to make sure they get vaccinated each fall. However, not everyone should be vaccinated. Always check with a doctor before a vaccination to make sure the person you wish to have vaccinated is eligible and has no risk factors associated with the vaccine. Vaccinations are not 100% effective in preventing the flu and viral pneumonia but they will reduce the chances of contracting the virus.

In addition to vaccinations, good habits help to avoid the spread of any virus or bacteria. These are:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, keep your distance from others.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands often and wash them well.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth as much as possible.
- Frequently sanitize shared areas such as kitchens, bathrooms and shared belongings.
- Use paper products that can be thrown away instead of glasses, dishes, silverware.



## REMEMBER. . . .

The flu and pneumonia are dangerous but there are precautions you can take to protect yourself and the people you serve.