

The Emergency Department (ED) at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital is seeing a large number of patients with flu-like symptoms. Le Bonheur wants to help you protect your child. Jon McCullers, MD, Le Bonheur's pediatrician in chief and chair of Pediatrics for The University of Tennessee Health Science Center, answered some common questions parents might have about the flu.

What is seasonal flu?

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, seasonal flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by flu viruses. It spreads between people and can cause mild to severe illness.

What can I do to protect my children?

The flu vaccine is the best protection against the flu. Proper hand hygiene and good cough etiquette are also critical. Encourage your children to wash and sanitize their hands frequently. Cover all coughs and cough into your sleeve.

How can I treat flu symptoms at home?

If you suspect your child has the flu, call your pediatrician. There are anti-viral medications that can be prescribed by your doctor, but these medications are most effective when given early in the course of illness.

To relieve your child's pain and symptoms, first, administer fluids and make sure your child is getting plenty of rest. Acetaminophen helps with the aches, pains and fever reduction.

Is it too late to get the flu vaccine?

No. The shot can protect children to some effect as early as seven days after the vaccine, although full protection takes two to three weeks. Thus, a flu shot now can protect during this outbreak.

Is my child protected from this flu outbreak if he/she received a flu vaccine last fall?

Yes. The vaccine offered now is the same as last year's and protects against approximately 95 percent of all flu viruses.

When should I seek emergency medical treatment for my child?

Uncomplicated flu (fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches, generally feeling sick) can and should be diagnosed by your child's pediatrician, rather than the ED. The ED can help deal with complications of the flu, including severe dehydration, febrile seizures from the flu, and infections of the brain or lungs. Pneumonia, when the disease moves to the lungs, can either be viral or result from bacteria complicating the flu infection.

How much longer could this flu outbreak continue?

It varies from year to year. Six to eight weeks would be typical, and of course a second wave from a different strain could occur later or even overlap this outbreak.