

## **Influenza**

### **Causative agent**

Influenza is a highly infectious viral disease. It is caused by various types of influenza viral strains. Three types of influenza viruses are recognized: A, B and C. Type A is more common. In Hong Kong, the two subtypes of influenza A (H1N1 and H3N2) are most commonly seen. Emergence of new subtypes occurs from time to time at irregular intervals. They are responsible for widespread outbreaks and necessitate periodic reformulation of influenza vaccine. In Hong Kong, the disease is more prevalent in January-March and July-August.

### **Clinical features**

Influenza is an acute illness of the respiratory tract, characterized by fever, headache, muscle ache, runny nose, cough and sore throat. It is generally a mild illness.

### **Mode of transmission**

Airborne spread predominates among crowded populations in enclosed spaces. The infection may also be spread from person to person by direct contact with infected secretions.

### **Incubation period**

The incubation period is short, usually around 1-3 days.

### **Management**

The disease is usually self-limiting with recovery in 2-7 days. Anti-fever medicine and cough syrup are useful in relieving symptoms. Aspirin should not be used in children because it may cause Reye's Syndrome which is a rare complication involving the central nervous system and the liver. Antibiotics need not be used unless the illness is complicated by bacterial infection. Patients should also observe personal hygiene to prevent spreading the virus.

For patients with lower resistance or when there are signs of deterioration e.g. persistent fever or shortness of breath, they should seek early medical advice.

Antiviral agents like amantadine is effective for strains of influenza A, but it must be used with care as it can cause serious side effects, like loss of appetite, vomiting, insomnia, dizziness and hallucination.

### **Prevention**

1. Maintain good personal and environmental hygiene.
2. Keep hands clean and wash hands properly.
3. Wash hands when they are dirtied by respiratory secretions e.g. after sneezing.
4. Cover nose and mouth while sneezing or coughing and dispose of nasal and mouth discharge properly.
5. Good body resistance helps to prevent influenza infection. This can be achieved through a balanced diet, regular exercise, adequate rest, avoid too much stress and smoking.
6. During the "flu" season, it is better to avoid crowded public places where the ventilation is not good.
7. Influenza vaccine is prepared according to the prevalence of strains in the community each year, as recommended by the World Health Organisation. It is now offered to elderly home residents in Hong Kong, as the vaccine may reduce the severity of the disease and the likelihood of complications and death among elderlies.

*(Source: Hong Kong Centre for Health Protection)*