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As flu season starts, Ebola fear may fill emergency rooms



As [Ebola](#) ignites fear of a widespread outbreak, it's easy to overlook the fact that a common illness actually poses a far more serious threat to thousands of people in the U.S. Every year the flu kills between 3,000 and as many as 49,000 Americans, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports.

Flu season starts in October, and it remains to be seen how severe this year's flu season will turn out to be. But even in a mild year, the flu takes a deadly toll.

"The flu is easy to dismiss, especially among young healthy adults who think that they can just 'fight' the illness," Dr. Sudip Bose, an emergency medicine physician and former U.S. army doctor told CBS News. Even so, "Influenza A can wipe out the most vulnerable patients, including children, senior citizens and people with medical conditions."

Ninety percent of flu-related deaths are among people age 65 or older. Young children are also at risk; during the [2012-2013 flu season](#), 169 children died, according to the CDC.

Emergency room doctors normally see a 10 percent increase in the number of patients during cold and flu season. But this year they're expecting to see a much bigger influx of people worried that their flu-like symptoms could be something they've seen on the news.

"Due to the nature of what's going on in the community and also in the world, especially with Ebola and enterovirus," the uptick in patients would not be surprising, said Dr. Robert Glatter, an emergency physician at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York.

Glatter says hospitals like his are taking steps to be prepared for whatever walks through the door. "We have all protocols in place to isolate people, whether it's concern for Ebola or flu, we're always prepared," he told CBS News' Marlie Hall.

Initial symptoms of the two illnesses can look similar: fever, aches and fatigue. In order to tell the difference, one of the key factors medical staff will be looking for is a patient's travel history -- whether a person had recently been in one of the West African countries where Ebola is more widespread.

"The kinds of illnesses they could have are directly influenced by where they've been," Glatter explained.

Ebola is transmitted only through contact with the bodily fluids of someone who's sick and exhibiting symptoms of the disease, which progress to gastrointestinal illness and sometimes hemorrhaging, experts say. It has a fatality rate ranging from 50 to 90 percent.

The flu, by contrast, is far less lethal but much more easily transmissible. The flu virus can go airborne and spread through coughing or sneezing, as well as by touching contaminated surfaces or even shaking hands.

Complications of the flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, and the worsening of more severe conditions like asthma, heart failure and diabetes.

To stay out of the ER or doctor's office with a case of the flu this season, now is the time to get vaccinated, health officials say. Flu shots or [nasal sprays](#) are readily available and usually effective.

"Many people don't get vaccinated because they think that the immunization gives them the flu," said Dr. Randy Wexler, associate professor of family medicine at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. But that is a misconception, he said. "[Vaccinations] may cause achiness and fatigue, but they do not cause the flu."

Wexler added that elderly often forgo vaccinations, even though they're at risk for more serious complications. "Add it all up, and a lot of people, particularly those at risk, do not take the best precaution which is vaccination."

"At the end of the day, focus on the bigger responsibility," warns Bose. "Flu prevention is not just about you. [Getting vaccinated] can prevent grandma or babies from getting sick too."

The CDC lists several [flu vaccine options](#) for the 2014-2015 flu season. It notes that traditional flu vaccines, made to protect against three different flu viruses (called "trivalent" vaccines), and flu vaccines made to protect against four different flu viruses (called "quadrivalent" vaccines) are both available. Good hand-washing habits and using hand sanitizers can also cut down on the spread of the flu virus.

"The take-home message is that the flu is preventable," said Dr. Matthew Levy of John Hopkins Emergency Medicine unit. "Although the flu receives far less attention [than Ebola], it's a much bigger threat."

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