

Eating to beat the flu



By Leanna Knox

Health officials have been warning us for months about the strong likelihood that a second wave of H1N1 flu will strike this fall. Whether it is H1N1 or the usual seasonal flu, none of us want to get sick. Each year, between 2000 and 8000 people in Canada die of influenza or its complications, depending on how severe the variety of the flu is. It is important that all of us work to prevent the spread of the flu. The best plan to beat the flu is to make some healthy habits – such as eating healthy – a part of your family’s routine.

To prevent H1N1, the Public Health Agency of Canada has developed a helpful prevention checklist to guide our efforts. The first item on the list is to wash your hands frequently. Your hands come in contact with germs throughout the day so good hand washing is an important step to keep those nasty flu germs from entering the body. Teach your children to cough or sneeze into their arm instead of their hands, to keep as many germs off the hands as possible. Also, encourage your family to keep their hands away from their faces, as germs can easily enter the body through the nose, eyes and mouth. Another important thing to help prevent the flu is to get immunized. Guidelines for flu shots, including H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccines, are being released and clinics will be set up across the region to make it convenient for everyone to get their flu shot. Without a doubt, the best way to help your family to beat the flu is to prevent them from getting it in the first place!

There are certain habits that should always be part of a healthy lifestyle and which will certainly boost your chances of beating the flu. Healthy eating can give your body the best chance of fighting back as it is a key part in maintaining a healthy immune system. Being physically active also helps to keep your immune system strong, so include some moderate activity each day to stay healthy. Another important tool for staying healthy is sleep, as the immune system and the body recover during sleep.

Whether you are sick or not, protein is always needed to keep your body strong. Lean meat, tofu, poultry, fish, eggs and nuts are good sources of protein. Protein helps to maintain all of the body’s tissues including the membranes in the ears,

nose and throat where germs often enter the body. Eating two to three servings each day, according to Canada's Food Guide, is important to maintain the strength of these tissues and the barrier against germs.

When it comes to healthy eating for beating the flu, some vitamins are definitely crucial. Three vitamins that are key in immune system functioning are vitamins A, C and E. Many people are familiar with taking vitamin C to prevent catching a cold. While it may not actually prevent anyone from catching that cold it has been shown to reduce the length of time and the severity of illness. Vitamin C helps in two ways, by boosting production of white blood cells, the part of the blood that helps to fight infection, and by increasing the body's natural "anti-viral" system to prevent viruses from entering the body. Fighting infection and reducing the amount of virus entering the body are very useful tools for beating the flu. Make sure that vitamin C-rich foods are on your menu every day. Include citrus fruits, peppers, tomatoes, strawberries, papaya and green leafy vegetables to help to keep flu germs away. Another important immune-system booster is vitamin A. It helps to increase immune function and is found in orange and green produce. Include sweet potatoes, spinach, carrot, mango, apricots and broccoli often on your weekly menu. Vitamin E, also a key vitamin in fighting infection is found in nuts, seeds, green leafy vegetables, wheat germ and whole grain products. Include all of these great flu-beating foods in your family's diet.

Minerals such as zinc and iron play an important role in immune function. Even a mild deficiency of zinc has been linked to getting colds or flu more frequently. You can find zinc in beef, eggs, seafood and whole wheat products. With many children and teenagers thought to be getting less iron in their diets than the recommended daily amounts, and its key role in immune function, this mineral could do with some special attention for flu prevention. Iron is found in similar foods as those previously mentioned for being good sources of zinc, so choosing these foods can pack a double-punch to keep you healthy.

Staying well-hydrated is also an important part of fighting the flu. Dehydration causes air passages to dry out, making them less able to form a barrier against germs and leaving you more vulnerable to germs. Encourage everyone in your family to drink water throughout the day to keep well-hydrated.

With the likelihood of H1N1 returning this fall, it is important to keep your immune system ready to fight the virus. Frequent hand washing, getting plenty of rest, regular physical activity, and of course, healthy eating, are very helpful strategies to stay healthy. Don't let the flu get to you, include plenty of healthy foods to boost your body's ability to fight and beat the flu.

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