

Preventing and treating the flu

A natural medicine perspective

by Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP

WE'VE ALL BEEN BOMBARDED by the news that there is not enough flu vaccine to go around this year, and we've heard the accusations and faultfinding of politicians using this topic as yet another platform from which to point fingers. Much of that debate sidesteps the broader issues of whether the flu vaccine is a good thing for most people, whether it has unintended effects on those who take it, and what might be done to both prevent and treat the flu from a natural medicine perspective.

As a practicing naturopathic physician, my phone lines have been swamped with people asking questions about just these issues. At the time of this writing, I have not yet seen any flu cases this year, but by the time this article is published most homeopaths will have seen several cases.

Unlike some homeopaths, I incorporate several natural medicine approaches in the prevention and treatment of flu, as I find they work well with homeopathy and do not interfere with the action of homeopathic remedies. Not only are these adjunct approaches effective, they offer the caregiver something to do, which in many family settings may be helpful in and of itself! I would like to share my natural medicine recommendations for prevention and treatment below, along with an illustrative case from a previous flu season.

Preventing the flu, naturally

My general recommendations for flu prevention are:

- Get plenty of rest and drink enough water.
- Reduce refined sugar in the diet, especially things like soda, candy, and baked goods.
- Increase fruits and vegetables in the diet.
- Continue to get regular exercise. It helps to keep you healthy by reducing or countering stress, enhancing circulation, and offering another mode of elimination via perspiration.
- Wash hands often, especially before eating.
- If you are feeling run down, try to take a day off, for rest and relaxation.

If one of my patients has been in close contact with someone who has come down with the flu, I underscore the above suggestions.

Supplements for prevention

Below are my basic guidelines for supplements to use preventively for an average adult, not currently taking other medications. These supplements foster good immunity while helping to create and maintain healthy mucous membrane tissue, which is essential for fending off germs.

Note: *These are only guidelines; if you also suffer from other, unrelated chronic diseases, consult your primary care physician first.*

- Vitamin C, 1000 mg, three times per day
- Beta carotene, 25,000 IU per day
- Zinc, 15 mg per day
- Vitamin E, 400 IU per day

I also recommend the use of the following botanical medicine products to help prevent flu.

- *Astragalus membranaceus*
- *Hydrastis canadensis*
- *Sambucus nigra*

If you're using the tincture form, I recommend 15–20 drops, two to three times a day; if you're using the capsule form, 2 capsules, two to three times a day.

In addition, I recommend:

- garlic, used liberally in cooking, or taken in pill form, 1 capsule, two to three times a day.

Each of the above botanical products helps to bolster immune function and keep the mucous membranes doing their job.

A bleary-eyed flu patient

I did a house call for Jana, a 42-year-old stay-at-home mom with the flu, late in the afternoon on a Tuesday. She was dozing when I entered her room, which was quite warm. I roused her to take her case, though I hated to, as she looked so peaceful!

Jana complained of a vague headache and overall body aches. Her head was full of mucus and felt heavy. She told me that it felt as though her thoughts were moving through molasses, that it really wasn't safe for her to be in charge of her small children. She had hired a babysitter so that she could sleep; indeed she had spent the entire past two days in bed, dozing off and on. She said that everything felt heavy, as if it would not be possible for her to get up and walk around. The headache was all over her head but worse in the occiput (back of the head). She had a dull expression and heavy eyes, as well as a kind of inability to care about anything due to the deep exhaustion she was experiencing.

Constitutional or *genus epidemicus*?

For a patient who has been diagnosed with influenza, we give the indicated homeopathic remedy. For some, that will be another dose of their constitutional remedy. For others, it will be a new remedy for them, often one of the *genus epidemicus* remedies, specific to that year's flu. How do you know which way to go?

If the patient's physical general symptoms (body temperature, food cravings, thirst, etc.) have not shifted



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from their usual state, and their symptoms (particularly the modalities of their flu symptoms) are akin to their usual state, and their mental symptoms or temperament also have not changed significantly, we re-dose with the constitutional remedy. If the symptoms are significantly different from the patient's usual state, we prescribe a different remedy.

During the flu, Jana was entirely different than her usual self: her symptoms were not the kind she usually had, and her mental state was a far cry from her norm. (Jana was usually quite animated and talkative; she had responded well in the past to the remedy, *Sulphur*, for her PMS and irritability.) This told me that she was in a true acute state and that I should prescribe accordingly.

Jana's symptoms of influenza with prostration, apathy and dullness of mind, heavy eyelids, and occipital headache were indicative of the remedy, *Gelsemium*, so I gave her a dose of *Gelsemium* 30c. I also left some *Gelsemium* 30c and 200c with her husband, along with instructions as to when to give more, if necessary. I asked them to call me the next morning.

Great expectations?

What do we expect when we give a homeopathic remedy in a case like this? We do not expect miracles. We expect the patient to respond by having fewer, less intense symptoms. We expect their energy level to improve. We expect the overall duration of the illness to be shortened. And lastly, we expect the long-term impact of the flu to be negligible or non-existent. Believe it or not, many people who come through an acute illness such as the flu using supportive natural medicine actually feel better, more energized, and mentally clearer on their recovery than they did before they fell ill.

Jana recovered nicely. She took several doses of *Gelsemium* 30c that first day and one dose of *Gelsemium* 200c the following day. She said that the first thing to change was her mental state. She stayed in bed another day, but felt more "with it," more capable of thinking. The next thing to dissipate was the headache, followed by the body aches. By the end of the week, Jana was feeling more or less back to normal, which in my assessment was quite a good outcome. Many with the flu will struggle for several weeks, if not longer.

Treating the flu, naturally

Regardless of the homeopathic remedies chosen for a patient with the flu—and often times I must first use one remedy, then another as the pathology shifts and new symptoms arise—I do offer other natural medicine

approaches to reduce the intensity and duration of symptoms.

Most folks with the flu find it difficult to swallow pills or to drink unpleasant tasting herbal combinations. I have had the best compliance with the following recommendations:

- Hot Epsom salt baths: Put 2–3 cups of Epsom salt in a warm bath for a good soak. This helps to draw out inflammation and decrease muscle soreness and joint pain.
- Hot water bottle: This can be a welcome presence to the chilly and sore patient. It can be moved around and kept as warm as desired.
- Gentle massage: This can be very soothing, as it helps increase circulation and facilitate elimination.
- Bromelain: This enzyme derived from pineapple helps to reduce inflammation and to thin mucus. The capsules are small and do not leave a bad taste. I recommend 500 mg, two to three times a day.
- Vitamin C in powdered form, dissolved in juice or water, 1000 mg, three times a day.
- Vegetable or chicken broth will help to replenish electrolytes and has other healing influence. Often it is just what the patient wants.
- Any and all of the supplements listed above under "prevention" are also effective for the treatment of flu, if the patient can tolerate them.
- If there is nausea, I recommend adding ginger or chamomile tea as desired. If there is significant coughing, I suggest herbal teas and tinctures made from mullein, slippery elm, and red cherry bark. I might troubleshoot other specific symptoms, based on the presenting problems of the patient.

Lastly, as a patient is recuperating from the flu, I will place them on the same prophylactic protocol as used for prevention and remind them that they are more vulnerable for a while. They should plan their schedule accordingly, strategizing ways to keep stress down and keep healthy habits up.

Simple steps

Whether or not sufficient flu vaccine is made available, we have many other approaches to the prevention and treatment of flu at our disposal. Instead of succumbing to the hysteria surrounding this issue, we would do better to focus on simple, yet effective approaches to this troublesome illness that moves around the globe each year. 🍃

