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Influenza – Beyond Respiratory Illness

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Annual epidemics of seasonal influenza cause hundreds of thousands of deaths, high levels of morbidity, and substantial economic loss. Global influenza circulation has been heavily suppressed by public health measures and travel restrictions during COVID-19 pandemic. As many countries are now transitioning to COVID-19 endemic state, restrictions have been loosened or been lifted entirely, creating an opening for influenza and other respiratory viruses. As such, many more people might catch the flu and potentially be at risk of serious illness.

Although influenza is primarily considered a respiratory infection and causes significant respiratory mortality, evidence suggests that influenza has an additional burden due to broader consequences of the illness. Some of these broader consequences include cardiovascular events, exacerbations of chronic underlying conditions, increased susceptibility to secondary bacterial infections, functional decline, and poor pregnancy outcomes, all of which may lead to an increased risk for hospitalization and death.

Flu vaccination could be more important than ever now, both to protect those most at risk, as well as to protect health systems that are already under pressure due to COVID-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that almost everyone aged 6 months and older get a seasonal flu vaccine each year. Flu vaccines are updated each season to keep up with changing viruses. Also, immunity wanes over a year so annual vaccination is needed to ensure the best possible protection against the flu.

Despite health authorities' recommendation, many at-risk adults are not aware of the impact of influenza and the importance of prevention. Healthcare provider's recommendation can make a difference. Clinicians are the most valued and trusted source of health information for adults. CDC recommended a systematic communication to help patients make an informed decision about vaccinations.

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