

A persistent threat

Runny nose, cough, fever and body aches are symptoms of influenza. PICTURE: CREATED BY KATEMANGOSTAR - WWW.FREEPIK.COM



UNDERSTANDING INFLUENZA

OUR immune system is designed to protect our body from "outside invaders" like bacteria, viruses, fungi and toxins.

It can become a deadly situation when our immune system is compromised.

Viruses like Covid-19 and influenza are constantly mutating, essentially putting on ever-changing "disguises" to evade our immune system.

Symptoms

Influenza, which is expected to rise post-pandemic, can be stopped via vaccination, writes **Meera Murugesan**

THE recent outbreaks of influenza at two boarding schools in Subang Jaya, Selangor, and Ipoh, Perak, show that we must always be on guard against infectious diseases.

Now that Malaysia is in the endemic phase and movement restrictions have



headache, runny nose, cough and muscle pain can make people confuse it with the common cold. Yet, influenza kills up to 650,000 people every year.

"The flu comes around every year, everywhere. The common cold rarely sends people to hospital. However, as shown by the Covid-19 pandemic, respiratory dis-

been relaxed, cases of influenza are expected to rise as people move freely and let their guard down, either by not wearing a face mask or failing to maintain good hygiene.

In Perak, 35 cases of influenza-like illness (ILI) have been recorded between January and July, with 26 active clusters in Kinta, Kuala Kangsar, Hulu Perak, Batang Padang, Kampar, Muallim and Perak Tengah districts. Kinta recorded the highest with six clusters.

KPJ Kluang Specialist Hospital consultant paediatrician Dr Tan Peng Ji says the illness is caused by the influenza virus, which mainly affects the respiratory system.

It is known globally as "seasonal influenza" because it comes around in the coldest season twice a year (once each in the northern and southern hemispheres' winter).

However, influenza circulates all year-round in tropical and subtropical countries like Malaysia.

This occasionally leads to cluster outbreaks, some of which can be major.

Unlike Covid-19, influenza may not always be thought of by most people as a serious illness due to its symptoms, such

Dr Tan Peng Ji

Each and every one of us has the chance of getting infected, but what makes the difference is the severity of the case.

BE CAUTIOUS

Dr Tan says high-risk groups, such as children, the elderly, pregnant women, those with hypertension or diabetes, and immunocompromised patients (those with low immune system and minimal ability to fight off infections and diseases) are likely to be badly infected.

"People with strong immunity often suffer mild symptoms and recover fast."

Dr Tan adds that similar to Covid-19, the influenza virus is highly contagious. Its mode of transmission is the same as Covid-19 — through the spread of respiratory droplets. Droplet transmission occurs when a person comes in close contact (within 1 metre) with someone who has respiratory symptoms (such as coughing or sneezing), and is at risk of having his mucosae (mouth and nose) or conjunctiva (eyes) exposed to potentially infective respiratory droplets.

"Vaccination against influenza is the single most effective measure to prevent infection and its potentially serious complications," says Dr Tan.

Vaccination is suitable for individuals above 6 months old and is recommended to be taken yearly as the contents of the influenza vaccine change gradually based on the World Health Organisation's prediction of most possible influenza virus strains in the coming year.

Personal hygiene also plays an important role. Frequent handwashing, regular use of hand sanitiser, observing physical distancing and proper cough etiquette may help stop the spread of germs and viruses.

Dr Tan says parents should teach their

- Fever
- Cough
- Runny nose
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Body ache
- Breathlessness
- Diarrhoea and vomiting

The severity of these symptoms varies, largely depending on the person's immunity

HISTORY OF THE SPANISH FLU

THIS year marks the 104th anniversary of one of the most catastrophic public health crises in modern history — the 1918 influenza pandemic, sometimes called the "Spanish Flu".

This devastating pandemic spread worldwide between 1918 and 1919. It's estimated that around one-third of the world's population became infected, killing around 50 million people.

Most of those who died were either very young (below 5 years old), those between 20 and 40, and those aged 65 and above.

(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

children to observe good hygiene in schools and childcare facilities.

Parents should also ensure that their children have a good supply of tissues, soap, hand sanitiser or disposable wipes when in school or outside the home to maintain good hygiene at all times.

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Vaccination can provide effective protection against influenza.

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