Influenza: Then and Now

In 1918, one hundred years ago, the world experienced an influenza pandemic. It was called the Spanish Flu and infected one-third of the world’s population. It killed at least 50 million people, most of whom were healthy, young adults. World War I was being waged; civilians and troops, worldwide, suffered more lives lost to the pandemic than from fighting.

In 1918, scientists had not yet discovered flu viruses, but we know now that it was caused by an Influenza A (H1N1) virus. There were no laboratory tests to detect the virus. There were no vaccines to help prevent flu infection, no antiviral drugs to treat flu illness and no antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections that can be associated with flu infections. Doctors and nurses were in short supply. At one point in Chicago, physicians were reporting a staggering number of new cases, reaching as high as 1,200 people each day.

Four pandemics have occurred in the past century: 1918—which was the worst, 1957, 1968 and 2009. Read more about the 1918 Influenza on the CDC website at https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2018/05/1918-flu

So that was then; how about now? Viruses mutate at alarming rates. While the science of influenza has come a long way in 100 years, there is still a lot of work to do. First we need to understand that influenza is not the common cold and it is not the stomach flu. It is very contagious and spread by coughing, sneezing and close contact. CDC just released last year’s flu report, which states that 900,000 people were hospitalized and 80,000 died from the flu in the US. The death toll for children during the 2017-2018 season was a record-breaking 180, which surpassed the previous high of 171 for a non-pandemic influenza season.

Knowledge is power and we now understand the importance of cough and respiratory etiquette, hand washing and social distancing. More effective vaccines are needed and are being worked on, but in the meantime, we encourage you to take advantage of what is available. A dose of flu vaccine is recommended every flu season. Infants need their first dose of flu vaccine at 6 months of age. It takes about two weeks for protection to develop, so now is the time to make plans to get flu shots for yourself and your family.

Flu vaccine is not perfect, but it is the best protection modern science has against the disease. If you have questions about flu shots or where you can get one, please call your medical clinic or Horizon Public Health at 320-208-6670.