

Flu — more than just sniffles

“IT’S just the flu” is something we often hear someone say when they are under the weather. It gives the impression that influenza is nothing to be worried about.

However, the recent death of Taiwanese actress Barbie Hsu, who reportedly succumbed after contracting influenza-related pneumonia, has drawn fresh attention to the dangers of this disease.

Many people still think influenza is nothing to worry about. Even when they do get sick, they assume it will be mild and that they will recover in a few days. While most people do, some individuals aren’t so lucky.

IMU University Professor of internal medicine and infectious diseases Dr James Koh Kwee Choy says traditionally, influenza is associated with a high fever that comes very quickly — a person can be fine one day and have a high fever the next.

Following that, some of them will have body aches, sore throat and shortness of breath — four classic symptoms associated with influenza which can happen within 24 to 48 hours.

Many people are tempted to just soldier on, but a high fever that does not subside in three days is a sign that complications might be setting in.

Those with symptoms such as restlessness, agitation and altered consciousness, such as being confused — which is more common among children and older persons — should see a doctor immediately, he stresses.

Another easily missed warning sign is vomiting, as this is most often associated with food poisoning.

THE VULNERABLE

Among children, the signs can be slightly different, explains Dr Koh.

“Children can deteriorate very quickly, become very quiet or sleepy, and get dehydrated easily.”

They may also make a lot of sounds while breathing that are not normal (noisy breathing), and this means they

are having difficulty breathing and may have low blood oxygen levels.

People should not wait until these signs appear before seeing a doctor, especially if they fall into the high-risk category which includes pregnant women and children below the age of 5, adults who have comorbid conditions like asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease, or those who smoke or vape.

“These factors increase the risk of complications, and the risk is even higher if those conditions are not well-controlled,” says Dr Koh.

In addition, many people are not even aware of underlying health conditions that could heighten their risk, hence a person can appear to be in good health and still develop complications such as pneumonia.

PROTECT AGAINST INFLUENZA

Influenza vaccines are the most effective way to prevent influenza and should be taken annually to safeguard against the most current influenza strains and protect against serious and potentially fatal complications.

One such complication is pneumonia, which was the leading cause of death among Malaysians in 2023, says Dr Koh, overtaking coronary heart disease for the first time in 20 years.

The Health Ministry recently launched a nationwide influenza vaccination campaign which offers free vaccines to senior citizens who have at least one comorbidity.

Dr Koh says unfortunately, there is low awareness among Malaysians that influenza can be deadly and thus they have little motivation to protect themselves.

In addition, Malaysia does not have clear seasons when influenza cases spike and instead has sporadic outbreaks that are unpredictable.

As it takes around two weeks for immunity to develop, those who wait until there is an outbreak before taking the vaccine are still vulnerable

to infection during that period. This is why annual influenza vaccinations are important.

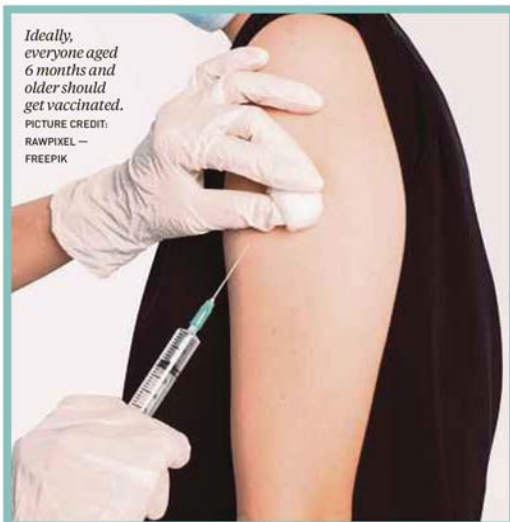
Dr Koh says the difference between a vaccinated and unvaccinated person would be like a person who is trained in self-defence and one who isn’t.

Both have the same risk of getting “attacked” but the person who is trained (vaccinated) has a better chance of fighting off the “assailant”.

Everyone is at risk, he adds as influenza doesn’t pick and choose.

Ideally, everyone aged 6 months and older should get vaccinated, while a more targeted approach would be to vaccinate all individuals at higher risk for complications, which are those below 2 and above 65 years, pregnant women, adults with comorbid conditions and people with weakened immune systems, as well as healthcare workers and caregivers of the very young or old.

➔ meera@nst.com.my



Ideally, everyone aged 6 months and older should get vaccinated. PICTURE CREDIT: RAWPIXEL — FREEPIK

Many people still think influenza is nothing to worry about. PICTURE CREDIT: EVENING_TAO — FREEPIK



There is low awareness among Malaysians that influenza can be deadly, and thus they have little motivation to protect themselves, says IMU University Professor of internal medicine and infectious diseases Dr James Koh Kwee Choy. PICTURE CREDIT: IMU UNIVERSITY