



RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES

How to reduce their frequency

A PALIG White Paper

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Severe Respiratory Illnesses are on the Rise:

What You can do to Protect your Health

During the COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns, it wasn't just the spread of COVID-19 that was slowed. Other communicable (person-person, infectious) respiratory infections were also reduced as school children stayed at home, offices closed their doors and face masks became a normal public sight.

Now, with societies opened up again, non-COVID-19 respiratory infections (e.g. common colds, influenza, pneumonia) are increasing at a very fast rate.

The rapid rise of these diseases is due to the fact that people were essentially isolated from each other for a couple years, which resulted in lower levels of immunity and higher susceptibility to disease now that we are going back to school, work and social events unmasked.

This rebound in infectious respiratory disease has been so sudden that some parts of the world are even experiencing high rates of influenza, other respiratory infections (e.g. RSV) and COVID-19, all at the same time¹.

And these respiratory infections can be just as dangerous and deadly as COVID-19. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), for example, over 400,000 people are hospitalized every year for complications related to the flu, of which 36,500 die².

IMPORTANT NOTE: *This information is provided to help assist you in understanding potential causes of your illness – if you are in a high-risk group and/or have any of the severe signs or symptoms listed in the next section, you should seek help immediately and follow your doctor's advice*



Influenza “Flu” causes
400,000 hospitalizations
in Latin America and Caribbean each year

¹MacMillan C. ‘Tripledeemic’: What Happens When Flu, RSV, and COVID=10 Cases Collide? Yale Medicine, January 12, 2023.

²Vicari AS et al. Seasonal Influenza Prevention and Control Progress in Latin America and the Caribbean in the Context of the Global Influenza Strategy and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Am J Trop Med Hyg. 2021 May 10;105(1):93-101.



THE GOOD NEWS

YOU have the Power to Protect Your Health

The good news is that these numbers and trends are not set in stone. As with COVID-19, you have the individual ability and power to greatly reduce the chances that you and your family gets sick or dies from these serious respiratory infections.

The purpose of this PALIG brief report is to give you some important information and specific action steps that you can take to minimize your risk of the severe respiratory diseases that are currently re-bounding in the LAC region.

And, by doing so, you will be protecting not only yourself, but also your family, loved ones and your community.



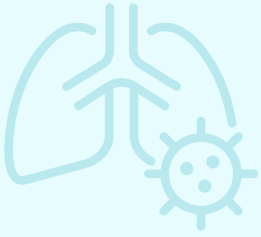
YOU have the power to protect yourself and your family

Respiratory Disease



Respiratory disease affects the lungs and other parts of the respiratory system. Respiratory diseases may be caused by infection, by smoking tobacco, or by breathing in secondhand tobacco smoke, radon, asbestos, or other forms of air pollution. Respiratory diseases come in two main forms: **acute, communicable (infectious)** respiratory illnesses like influenza, and pneumonia and **chronic, non-communicable** illnesses such as asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), among others.

In this PALIG White Paper, we will focus primary on the acute, infectious respiratory illnesses that are currently increasing rapidly post-pandemic.



Influenza, Pneumonia

and other Severe Infectious Respiratory Illnesses

Similar to COVID-19, communicable respiratory illnesses are usually caused by a virus or bacteria that is transmitted through person-person contact or through the air as droplets.

Two of the most common and dangerous infectious respiratory illnesses, other than COVID-19, are **influenza** and **pneumonia**.

Influenza (also known as the flu) is a common viral infection that attacks the nose, throat, and lungs.

Symptoms include fever, chills, muscle aches, cough, congestion, runny nose, headaches, and fatigue.

At first, the flu may seem like a common cold with a runny nose, sneezing and sore throat. Colds usually develop slowly. But the flu tends to come on suddenly. And while a cold can be miserable, you usually feel much worse with the flu.

Pneumonia is a lower respiratory infection that inflames the air sacs in one or both lungs. The air sacs may fill with fluid or pus, causing cough with phlegm or pus, fever, chills, and difficulty breathing. A variety of organisms, including bacteria, viruses and fungi, can cause pneumonia. Pneumonia can range in seriousness from mild to life-threatening.

Each year, approximately **137,000 people die** in Latin America from lower respiratory infections, including pneumonia.



In sum, severe communicable respiratory illnesses like influenza and pneumonia can be extremely dangerous, costly, and potentially deadly. In the next sections, we talk about how to best minimize your risk for these diseases.

³ World Health Organization, 2020.

KEEPING YOUR LUNGS

and Respiratory System Healthy



There are many things you can do to keep your lungs and respiratory system healthy. The following is a list of -some of the most important actions you can take:



1. The first thing you can do is to stop smoking and vaping.



2. Try to reach and maintain a healthy weight. People with obesity have less space for lung expansion.



3. Exercise regularly. Check with your healthcare provider before you start exercising.



4. Eat healthy foods.



5. Get enough sleep.



6. Stay hydrated, unless your provider gives you a limit on how much liquid you can drink.



REDUCING

**YOUR RISK
OF GETTING THE FLU**

Many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean conduct flu vaccination campaigns each year. We encourage you to “tune in” to these campaigns and to get your annual flu vaccination, especially if you are at high risk for severe complications.

The World Health Organization especially recommends annual flu vaccination for:

- Individuals with chronic medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease
- Pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy
- Children aged 6 months to 5 years
- Elderly individuals (aged more than 65 years)
- Health-care workers

Influenza, the “flu” is a very common respiratory illness that can become very severe and even lead to death. In this section, we look at ways to prevent getting the flu.

Ways you can reduce your risk of getting influenza (the “flu”):



1. Get Vaccinated: The most effective way to prevent the flu is to get the annual flu vaccine. The vaccine helps your body develop immunity against the flu virus.



2. Practice good hygiene: Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially before touching your face or eating.



3. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and dispose of the tissue properly.



4. Avoid close contact with people who are sick.



5. Maintain a healthy immune system: Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get enough sleep, and manage stress until you're feeling better.

Action Items – Preventing Severe Respiratory Illnesses

- Get your annual flu shot
- Continue the good hygiene practices you learned during the pandemic

What to Do if you Get Sick

Despite your best efforts at prevention, there will be times that you do come down with a respiratory illness. When you do get sick, it is critically important to:

- (A) Determine what type of respiratory illness you have;
- (B) Properly manage the illness so it doesn't get worse, and
- (C) Seek medical care if you show certain signs or symptoms.

Importantly, the immediate actions you should take if you get sick depend on whether you are a member of a group that is at **"high-risk"** for severe complications from respiratory illnesses (See Box).

Groups that are at "High-Risk" for severe complications from the flu and other serious respiratory illnesses.



Age: People older than 65 years and younger than 5 years are at higher risk



Pregnancy: Pregnant women and those that have recently given birth



Medical Conditions: Some medical conditions including asthma, chronic lung disease, obesity, heart disease and those who are immunocompromised.

If you are in one of these "high-risk" groups and contract a serious respiratory illness, you should seek medical care as soon as possible.

(A) Determine (diagnose) what type of respiratory illness you have

It can be difficult to know what type of respiratory infection you have because the signs and symptoms of the various illnesses can be similar. Allergies can also be confused with respiratory infection.











Trained medical professionals, i.e. doctors, nurses, are the only people that can give you a definitive diagnosis of your illness. Determining what you have will include a laboratory analysis.

As a starting point, however, Table 1 below shows some of the common signs and symptoms that are associated with Coronavirus (COVID-19), Flu, Cold and Allergies.

IMPORTANT NOTE: *This information is provided to help assist you in understanding potential causes of your illness – if you are in a high-risk group and/or have any of the severe signs or symptoms listed in the next section, you should seek help immediately and follow your doctor's advice.*



Table 1. Common Symptoms of Coronavirus, Flu, Cold, Allergies

Symptoms	Coronavirus (Symptoms range from mild to severe)	Flu Abrupt onset of symptoms	Cold Gradual onset of symptoms	Allergies
 Fever	Common	Common	Rare	Sometimes
 Cough	Common	Common	Common	Sometimes
 Headache	Sometimes	Common	Rare	Sometimes
 Aches and Pains	Sometimes	Common	Common	No
 Fatigue	Sometimes	Common	Sometimes	Sometimes
 Sore Throat	Sometimes	Sometimes	Common	No
 Shortness of Breath	Sometimes <small>(in more serious infections)</small>	No	No	Common
 Sneezing	Rare	No	Common	Common
 Stuffy Nose	Rare	Sometimes	Common	Common
 Diarrhea	Rare	Sometimes	No	No

Source: Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization

Properly Managing your Respiratory Illness so it Doesn't get worse

If you are at high-risk and/or your condition worsens, you should seek medical attention as soon as possible.

If, however, you are not in a high-risk group for complications from respiratory infection, you can probably initially stay home, rest, drink plenty of fluids and manage the symptoms of the disease. This would normally include taking a fever reducing medication that may have been recommended by your doctor.

Seek medical care if you show certain signs or symptoms.

If you have any of **emergency symptoms** of the flu or other respiratory condition listed in Table 2, you should seek medical care right away.

Table 2. Emergency Symptoms – Seek Medical Care Immediately

If you have emergency symptoms of the flu, get medical care right away. For **adults**, emergency symptoms can include:



Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath



Chest pain



Ongoing dizziness



Seizures



Worsening of existing medical conditions



Severe weakness or muscle pain

Emergency symptoms in **children** can include:



Difficulty breathing



Pale, gray or blue-colored skin, lips or nail beds — depending on skin color



Chest pain



Dehydration



Severe muscle pain



Seizures



Worsening of existing medical conditions



Action Items - What To Do if You Get Sick with a Respiratory Illness

- If you are at high-risk, seek medical care if you have severe illness and/or are in a high-risk group
- If you are not in a high-risk group, determine what you likely have and manage the symptoms of your illness, e.g. fever, through staying home, rest, and drinking fluids.
- Even if you are not in a high-risk group, seek medical care if you have any of the “emergency symptoms” listed in Table 2.

Conclusion



We hope that this PALIG White Paper has helped you understand the importance of protecting yourself and your family, not just from COVID-19, but from other severe respiratory illnesses as well.

By continuing to practice some of the preventive practices that we learned all too well during the pandemic, i.e. washing our hands, keeping distance from those who are sick, and getting vaccinated, you can greatly reduce the chances that you or your family will come down with one of these respiratory illnesses.

If you do get sick with a severe respiratory illness, we encourage you to seek medical care, especially if you are at high-risk or show any of the emergency symptoms listed in the table above. And if you have any questions or concerns, we encourage you to reach out to your primary care provider (PCP). Your PCP is always there for you, helping you stay well and to recover quickly if you get sick.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This information is provided to help assist you in understanding potential causes of your illness – if you are in a high-risk group and/or have any of the severe signs or symptoms listed in the next section, you should seek help immediately and follow your doctor's advice.



DISCLAIMER

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