

Take Two Aspirin and Prolong the Flu

Fever-reducers may hinder infection fighting

By Anne Burke

HealthScout Reporter

FRIDAY, Dec. 8 (HealthScout) -- With the flu season poised to unleash its annual fury, here's a warning: Don't mess with Mother Nature.

Taking aspirin or Tylenol for the flu actually could prolong your illness by up to 3½ days, say researchers at the University of Maryland.

That's because fever may be the body's natural way of fighting an infection like the flu, they say, and taking aspirin or acetaminophen -- the generic name for products such as Tylenol -- may interfere with that process.

"You're messing with Mother Nature," says Dr. Leland Rickman, an associate clinical professor of medicine at the University of California, San Diego. An elevated temperature "may actually help the body fight the infection quicker or better than if you don't have a fever."

The Maryland researchers found that influenza A sufferers who were treated with aspirin or acetaminophen extended their illness from five days to about 8½ days, says Karen Plaisance, an associate professor at the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy and one of the study's authors.

Influenza A tends to be the dominant flu in any season.

Aspirin and Tylenol are known as antipyretics, or anti-fever therapy. They make you feel better because they relieve headache, muscle aches and other discomfort that goes along with the flu.

Plaisance's research used data collected in the 1970s and 1980s for a study on new flu vaccines. Volunteer participants were induced with one of three illnesses: influenza A, which is a viral infection, or the bacterial infections *S. sonnei* or *R. rickettsii*. Some people became ill and were given aspirin or Tylenol to help them feel better.

But those with influenza A who took these anti-fever drugs were sick much longer than their flu-infected counterparts who took nothing, the study says.

The *S. sonnei* sufferers who took medication also had longer illnesses, but probably not because of the drugs, the researchers say. And people with *R. rickettsii* who took aspirin or Tylenol did not experience longer illnesses, they say. Findings appear in the December issue of *Pharmacotherapy*.

The varying results indicate that fever plays a different role in viral infections than it does in bacterial

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infections, Plaisance says.

So, what's a poor flu sufferer to do?

Taking aspirin or acetaminophen to feel better while you have the flu is a strictly personal decision, Plaisance says. If you have to go to work or have responsibilities at home, she says, it might be a good idea to take something because it will relieve your symptoms so you can do what you need to do.

However, if you're lucky enough to be able to stay in bed, you might want to try to tough it out without drugs because your bug may be gone sooner, she adds.

Whatever you do, don't give aspirin to children who have the flu or any other viral illness, Rickman says. Aspirin use for viral illnesses has been linked to Reye's syndrome, a potentially fatal childhood disease characterized by brain and liver damage.

Even if you're giving your child Tylenol, watch out, Plaisance says. With the abundance of cold and flu medications crowding store shelves today, it's easy to give a child an overdose of medication, she says.

What To Do

For more information on the flu and how to treat it, take a look at information provided by the [University of Virginia](#). And to find out about the availability of the flu vaccine this winter, check out the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Or, you might want to read previous HealthScout articles on the [flu](#).

SOURCES: Interviews with Karen Plaisance, Pharm.D., associate professor, School of Pharmacy, University of Maryland, Baltimore; Leland Rickman, M.D., associate clinical professor of medicine, University of California, San Diego, San Diego; December 2000 *Pharmacotherapy*

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