Is it really the Flu….or something else?

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Influenza is hitting the US early and hard this year. Urgent care centers and ER’s are being swamped with febrile illnesses. Proper diagnosis can be tricky given the overlapping of symptoms with other illnesses. It is important to consider other diseases when evaluating patients with a fever during the flu season.

Influenza characteristically presents as a sudden onset of symptoms which include fever, dry cough, sore throat, muscle aches, headache, and fatigue. The fatigue can be severe. Runny nose or nasal congestion may also be present but to a lesser extent. While having gotten the flu vaccine may protect against some strains, mutations often occur and newer strains can develop that are not covered within the vaccine thus offering little protection. The currently available rapid flu tests have variable sensitivities so many centers choose to treat with appropriate anti-viral medications based upon clinical presentation and not perform in office testing.

Pneumonia can surprisingly mimic the flu. Fever and cough are the hallmark and may be non productive. Sore throat can occur from irritation from coughing and not a primary result of infection. Body aches and fatigue often occur with bacteremia and is frequently present in pneumonia. It is important to note that a secondary bacterial pneumonia may result in the face of influenza. A change in symptoms to a productive cough, chest pain, shortness of breath or hypoxemia should prompt further consideration for chest x-ray to help determine if there is a concomitant viral or bacterial pneumonia.

Strep throat is another common illness that may mimic the flu. Sore throat, fever, headache, chill are frequently present. Fatigue is typically not a prominent feature and children in particular may present with abdominal pain/nausea and/or a headache. Cough is not a common feature of strep, but not all patients read the
textbook and this author will attest to numerous cases of adolescents having strep infection with a cough.

Primary HIV infection may present as a flu like febrile illness and can be associated with a diffuse rash. A good social/sexual history may be helpful in deciding if HIV testing is warranted. Other viruses such as parainfluenza and adenoviruses may also mimic influenza.

So in summary fever, cough and fatigue during flu season may not be the flu at all. A good history and exam along with considerations of other infections is important, especially if influenza testing is not being performed, to avoid missing a potentially more serious disorder.