

# YOUR GPs CAN TREAT THESE CONDITIONS

**T**he GPFIRST Programme was launched in 2014 to encourage patients in eastern Singapore to see their general practitioners (GPs) for mild to moderate medical conditions, rather than head straight to the emergency department. In this regular series, our eastern community GPs offer advice on common ailments *Caring* readers might face.

In this issue, we focus on influenza and sand fly bites. Do visit [www.gpfirst.sg](http://www.gpfirst.sg) or see your GP for more information on other common conditions such as nausea, headaches, sprains, fevers, cuts and bruises and mild scalds.



## COLD VERSUS FLU

**I am a 33-year-old female who fell ill two days ago. It started with a cough, which then escalated to other symptoms, including a headache, runny nose, a fever of 39.0°C and body aches. I have been lethargic and can hardly get up from bed. The symptoms have worsened very quickly, and although I am self-medicating, I am still feeling sick. It seems much worse than the usual common cold. How can my GP assess and treat me?**

Flu, or seasonal influenza, and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses. Different viruses cause them, but they have similar symptoms. In general, the flu gives rise to more intense and abrupt symptoms and can result in serious complications, compared to the common cold.

Your GP will assess you by checking

your medical history and doing a physical examination. The good news is that most cases of flu are self-limiting and, with symptomatic treatment, you should recover within a few days. However, some patients, especially those with immature or compromised immune systems, can develop complications from flu. These include pneumonia, myocarditis (inflammation of the heart) and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

Some red flags that will prompt further investigation and management include difficulty in breathing, chest pains, confusion and persistent vomiting. A chest X-ray, blood tests and even a referral to the hospital for further treatment may be required if these symptoms occur.



**Dr See Qin Yong** is Staff Registrar at the Department of Care and Health Integration at CGH. He received his MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery), Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine and Master of Medicine (Family Medicine) from the National University of Singapore. He is currently pursuing the Fellowship Programme in Family Medicine from the College of Family Physicians Singapore.

Influenza is infectious and spreads via respiratory droplets in the air. Protect your loved ones by wearing a surgical mask and covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. The mask should be changed every eight hours or when it is moist. Frequent hand-washing, especially before and after eating and after using the bathroom, is advised. Do stay at home to rest and avoid strenuous physical activity. It is also important to ensure that you are adequately hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids.

To minimise the risk of being infected by influenza, vaccinations can be considered. The influenza virus evolves constantly, thus a yearly immunisation is recommended. It takes about two weeks for the vaccine to take effect, so do get vaccinated before the peak flu season, which generally occurs from November to January and April to July in Singapore.

## SAND FLY BITES

**I am a 27-year-old male. I have just returned home from a holiday with friends, where we stayed at a camping ground that had access to the beach and hiking trails in the area. Everything went well, except that it rained on the last day of our trip and, as it was hot and humid, I wore only shorts and slippers to the beach for a game of beach football. We stopped for a break later, and my friends and I couldn't help scratching our legs all over. It seems like we had been bitten by some kind of insect. The itch was intense and although we washed our legs several times, the bites turned into red bumps that were painful. What could have bitten us? How can my GP help us relieve the itch and pain?**

Sounds like you got bitten by sand flies! Ouch! Sand flies are a generic term used to describe a winged, biting, blood-sucking fly. There are many varieties of sand flies, but it is only the female that does the biting and blood sucking, similar to mosquitoes.

In certain parts of the world, sand flies can transmit serious viral and protozoal

diseases, such as the Chandipura virus — a relative of the rabies virus — and leishmaniasis. Thankfully, in our part of the world, sand fly bites are usually just a minor annoyance. Typically, patients would suffer from itching, rashes, swelling, redness and warmth in the affected body parts. In more severe cases, the rash can spread out across a larger area.

To treat you, your GP will first check your temperature to ensure that there is no fever. He will also check your blood pressure and pulse, and perform a close examination of the rash to determine its morphology. In rare cases, bad allergic reactions can occur in response to such bites. As for treatment, in your case, a long-acting antihistamine to relieve the itch as well as a potent topical steroid, preferably combined with an antibiotic, should do the job nicely (systemic antibiotics need only be used if the bites are complicated by a skin infection).

As the old adage goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Covering up is obviously the best way to prevent bites, but that can be tough to do at the beach. An alternative would be applying insect repellent containing diethyltoluamide, or DEET, when you head out.

Take care and have fun the next time you hit the beach! ☺



**Dr Tan Tze Chong Justin** is a family physician at Pinetree Medical Clinic in Fengshan, Bedok. His four-year-old, who suffers from atopic dermatitis, has recently discovered the joys of playing on the beach. Keeping the sand flies off her has become his number one priority.

