

What's the difference between the stomach flu and influenza?

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

STANTON — Most people living in Michigan enjoy the variety of our four seasons, but it's the fifth, cold and flu season, we could definitely do without.

It's the end of February, and at this point it's probably safe to say you either know of someone who has had "the crud" or had you've had it yourself. And if you've been spared, consider yourself lucky!

Several viral illnesses have been spreading through our communities, and it's often difficult to tell them apart.

One of the most common viral illnesses making its presence known is viral gastroenteritis, commonly referred to as the "stomach flu." While several viruses can cause this illness, norovirus is the most common.

People with norovirus experience nausea, abdominal cramping, vomiting, and diarrhea 12 to 48 hours after being exposed. Norovirus is extremely contagious and easily spread through food, by person-to-

person contact, or contaminated surfaces. In most cases, people fully recover from norovirus, but sometimes hospitalization is required, especially for the very young or elderly. People with norovirus-like symptoms should stay home from school or work until they are symptom-free for 48 hours and should not prepare or serve food to others.

Influenza is another viral illness we see this time of year. Influenza is spread when a person sneezes or coughs, causing droplets containing the virus to spread into the air and land on surfaces. People become infected by breathing in these droplets or touching surfaces that the droplets fell onto. Symptoms of influenza include fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headaches, and/or fatigue and usually last 2 to 7 days. People with an influenza-type illness should stay home until they have been fever-free for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medi-

cines.

The best way to prevent influenza is for everyone, including healthy people, age 6 months and older, to get vaccinated. The vaccine is available at a variety of places, including your doctor's office, many pharmacies and the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD). You can contact the MMDHD to make an appointment by calling (989) 831-5237 in Montcalm County.

Everyone can take steps to help prevent norovirus and influenza. First and foremost, if you are sick, stay home. Be sure to thoroughly wash your hands often with warm water and soap and get in the habit of coughing and sneezing into your shirt sleeve and not onto your hands. Also, avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth because this is how germs enter the body.

And finally, visit www.cdc.gov/norovirus for information on how to clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces.