

Flu paranoia spirals out of control

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Around my office, I've become known as Flu Girl.

This is a term of endearment, I keep telling myself, but at the back of my mind there's a sneaking suspicion I'm branded for life.

It all started a few weeks ago when I woke up feeling yucky and my trusty, go-to herbal supplement when coming down with something — Airborne — failed to work.

Airborne and its generic spinoffs usually work well for me. The fruit-flavored tablet, when dissolved in water, gives an effervescent blast of over-the-counter vitamins that seem to nip colds in the bud if I take the stuff when symptoms first appear.

Not this time, though. Instead, I started to go off my feed, something that usually takes an act of God. This happens so rarely, I can remember only one time when I actually lost weight without the benefit of a virus.

The doctor looked at me a little funny when he came back into the consulting room to tell me the news: I had the flu. He gave some drugs for free and a note to say I could return to work after five days.

He wasn't looking me in the eye when he delivered the news. That's because he was looking at the door. And perhaps it was only my imagination that he bolted out of the room just as soon as he professionally could.

Was it swine flu? Bird flu? No, he laughed as he shut the door. "It's Type A," he said before the space closed between us. He was gone before I could ask what exactly Type A means.

"Oh that's your common, garden-variety flu," my boss later told me. I'm not sure what that means either, but I knew it was not good news.

I went home and alternated between sweating my bed sheets into a soggy swamp and shivering under them for the next few days.

Sneezes that came in threes convulsed my body. Anywhere near me was no place for healthy human beings.

After a day or so, I got a call from a co-worker asking how I was doing, and could I come outside. There was something on my doorstep for me, he said.

He delivered a large UPS mail box full of chicken soup and pasta pots, Jell-O and flowers, a card and other goodies; a care package from my co-workers.

I felt instantly better and searched around for the deliverer of glad tidings.

There, at a safe distance, he stood by his truck, a red bandanna wrapped around his face.

His whole demeanor screamed: Stay where you are — do not move another step toward me. Involuntarily, I walked over to give him a hug, but stopped outside of sneezing range.

His body language was all wrong.

"Wait, let me grab a camera," I said.

Instead of hugging him, I captured an image of him making a cross with his hands, his face fortified with the bandanna against Flu Girl.

I've been back at work three days and I'm fine, other than an occasional cough. Bandanna Boy still won't let me hug him.

Stacy from advertising walks around with a spray can of Lysol, and I think she may have some disinfectant wipes that she uses to swab surfaces I have touched. I haven't actually seen her do this, mind you, but I suspect.

Kelly is coughing and keeps glancing over at me with what looks like resentment. This too could just be my imagination.

Every time I cough, several minutes of office productivity are lost as everyone within hearing distance mentally crosses themselves and says a little prayer. The flu has people paranoid, and rightfully so. You can die from it.

I asked Adam DuBois of the Charlotte County Health Department what people can do to feel better about about being around people who have had, but are now recovered from, the flu.

He wasn't much help.

"Even here at the health department, we've all purchased Clorox wipes for our offices," DuBois said. "H1N1 is here, it's getting people sick and there's no vaccine available just yet to prevent against it. We've had to go back to basics and protect ourselves the way we were taught as children."

That means keeping a safe distance from coworkers who appear to be sick, staying home if you are sick or keeping your kids home, even if it means missing work, he said.

A vaccine for H1N1 swine flu was approved by the Food and Drug Administration earlier this week and will arrive in Charlotte County the first or second week of October, DuBois said.

Highest risk populations will be vaccinated first, including pregnant women, caregivers of infants, people between the ages of 6 months to 24 years and people ages 25 to 64 with compromised immune systems.

"Our goal is to have the vaccine available for everyone, just in a certain order," DuBois said.

That means working people — my coworkers, ostensibly healthy and holding the torch for the economy — will be the last to get the vaccine.