

April 29, 2009

Paranoia, caution walk a fine line

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OMAHA WORLD HERALD

This article quotes Layne A Prest, Associate Professor of Family Medicine at UNMC. A link is unavailable.

“Fear of flu paralyzes Mexico City.”

“Doubts on vaccine,” another Monday headline reads.

“Nation steps up plans for battling flu.”

OK, here’s the one I need:

“Health officials urge public to watch for signs of flu.”

Symptoms: high fever, cough or sore throat.

I do feel a little warm. My throat’s a little dry.

“Other symptoms include lethargy

(I was sleepy last night), poor appetite (I didn’t eat my evening fudge bar!!), nausea and diarrhea.”

Well, there it is. My stomach is off. And I don’t know how to describe my angry colon.

My stomach is growling, talking even.

I call my editor just to warn him: “Feeling crummy today. Sort of feel flu-y. Better figure out what’s going on.”

I retreat to bed after getting the kids to school. I sleep for two more hours. I dream about bugs crawling everywhere.

I drag myself downstairs to see how my mother-in-law is doing. (She’s visiting for a few days.) I hope I don’t give her the pig flu.

(I wouldn’t say it to her face, but she’s at the age at which a hangnail could do her in.) “I think you got it from the television,” she says.

It was cold and rainy, so it was nice to cozy up and watch the news about the swine flu sweeping the world.

I’ve read stories about the 1918 pandemic. That was before widespread air travel. It will move easier this time. I would stockpile food, but I’m scared to go to the store. So many potential carriers there.

I go back to bed and wait to die.

But by evening, my stomach is feeling much better.

I awake Tuesday morning feeling great. I bound down-stairs for a large breakfast and coffee.

But as I read the paper, I sense something churning in my stomach again.

A bit later, I begin writing about my near-death experience the day before. People will want to know what it’s like to live through a worldwide epidemic.

But as I try to describe the sounds my stomach made the day before, my stomach begins to talk to me again.

What’s happening to me?!

I hook up with **Layne Prest, a UNMC psychologist** who has researched people who have a problem thinking they have a problem.

“We call it somatization disorder,” he says. “There’s enough of a preoccupation with sickness that the person starts having physical symptoms.”

Perhaps anxiety caused a release of gastric acid in my stomach, he suggests.

“You don’t have the swine flu,” he says.

Prest says a person can be more susceptible to hypochondria and somatization problems depending on how he or she was raised.

You’re prone to overthinking disease if, for example, you were the youngest child of a woman who considered a sniffle due cause for a health emergency.

Prest and I agree I should blame my problems on my mother.

As for other overthinkers, Prest suggests, just try to relax and wait for a full, proper evaluation before jumping to conclusions. At the same time, do be cautious and aware.

It’s a fine line, he admits, between paranoia and caution.

“I had a guy coughing in a room yesterday, so I put on a mask before I entered the room to check on him,” he says.

“But the guy was from Mexico and had family in Mexico, and he was in a hospital coughing. So, while I felt a little silly putting on the mask at first, once I thought it through and saw them with masks on, too, I realized it wasn’t such a bad idea.”