

THIRTEEN SYMPTOMS YOU SHOULD NEVER IGNORE

Emergency room visits have shot up 37 percent among young women, in part because we're brushing off aches and pains until we're scary-sick. Be safe—read our health guide now.

NOT FEELING
BETTER AFTER
A FEW DAYS?
See your doc.

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WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO READ ARE THE STORIES OF three women who nearly died from illnesses they mistook for things like a common cold, a backache and a nasty sore throat. No, they didn't have swine flu. These women, just like thousands of others, risked their own lives because they ignored common symptoms until they became desperate emergencies. Experts told *Glamour* it's a worrisome trend: Even before swine flu hit, emergency room visits among women younger than 45 were on their way up, having increased by more than a third in the past decade, according to the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. Doctors say many of these E.R. visits could have been avoided had patients sought medical attention earlier. So, please, drop everything and get care if you're experiencing symptoms like the ones on these pages. *Continued on page 166* ➤

✓ A Cold That Won't Go Away

Sara Abbott was a very busy 28-year-old museum fund-raiser in Washington, D.C., with a typical workaholic lifestyle. Most mornings she'd get to the office at 7:00 A.M., often not leaving until eight or nine at night; then she'd go to a bar or a café to meet her friends. "I was having a great time, but I wasn't taking great care of myself," she says. "At one point all I had in my refrigerator was a jar of capers, a head of lettuce and a couple bottles of champagne." She had a cough and congestion that kept getting worse, but no time to be sick, so she just popped some over-the-counter medicine to keep going. "I didn't want to take time off work or let anyone down," Abbott says. She was sick for nearly two months before she thought of calling a doctor. When she couldn't get an appointment that fit her schedule, she just took more Dayquil and tried to ignore her illness. One morning, after a particularly late night, "I woke up and felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest," she says. "I couldn't breathe." When Abbott started coughing up blood, she was scared into action and asked a friend to drive her to the hospital. Getting a chest X-ray was the last thing she remembers until nine days later, when she woke up from a deep coma. She'd been hooked up to a ventilator that was breathing for her.

How Do I Know If It's Swine Flu?

Symptoms of H1N1 are very similar to the regular flu—fever, coughing, chills, sore throat, fatigue, headache, runny nose. Some people also throw up or feel nauseated. In general, treat it like you would any other flu, by staying home and resting—but get to the doctor ASAP if you're pregnant; if you have an underlying condition like asthma, lupus or diabetes; or if you don't start getting better after three or four days, says Dr. Pines. And head to the E.R., not just your doctor, if you also have shortness of breath, chest or abdominal pain or pressure, sudden dizziness, confusion or severe vomiting, says the CDC—those are signs it could be something worse than swine flu.

What likely began as a simple respiratory infection—something that in the majority of cases could've been cured weeks earlier by a round of antibiotics, says Jesse Pines, M.D., an assistant professor of emergency medicine at the University of Pennsylvania—morphed into pneumonia, and then life-threatening septic shock. Now 32, living in Boston with her

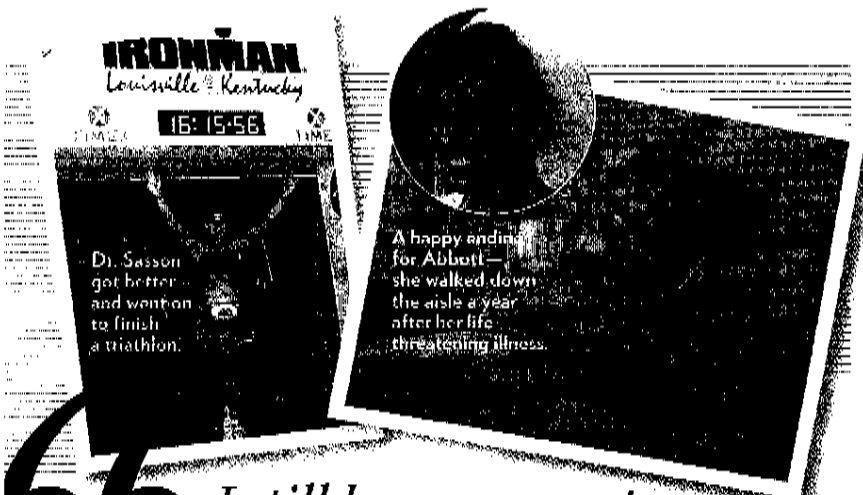
husband and baby, Abbott says she can't believe she put her career before her health: "I still have moments when I think about what would have happened if I hadn't gotten help when I did."

The smarter health move:

What Abbott—or any woman with a bad cold like hers—should have done is slow down as soon as the symptoms started coming on, curbing late nights, drinking plenty of fluids and taking a day or two off work if possible. Anyone who doesn't start feeling better after three or four days should head straight to her doctor, says Dr. Pines. Getting a last-minute appointment with a primary care physician isn't always easy—in fact, Dr. Pines places some of the blame for increasing E.R. visits on doctors' tight schedules. But, in most cases, if you give the front-office staff a few details ("I've been sick for more than 10 days," or "This is the worst sore throat I've ever had") and insist on being seen, they'll fit you in. If not, consider an urgent-care facility or a walk-in clinic in a pharmacy like CVS or Walgreens.

✓ Severe and Sudden Body Aches or Pain

At 26, Comilla Sasson, M.D., was finishing her medical residency in Atlanta when she started having excruciating back pain. She'd just finished her first triathlon and was training for another, so she chalked the achiness up to training too hard. Then, about a week later, she started feeling weak and short of breath—she wasn't able to dash up a flight of stairs anymore without stopping. "Believe it or not, I blew it off and just told myself I was out of shape," says Dr. Sasson. A few weeks after her muscle pain had started, she showed up for a shift at the hospital sweating and hardly able to breathe, her pulse racing. Luckily, she worked in the E.R. "My colleagues literally forced me into the CT scanner," says Dr. Sasson. The image it produced pinpointed the cause of her symptoms: two potentially deadly pulmonary emboli, or blood clots in her lungs. The pain and shortness of breath had been caused by the clots and the fluid collecting there. "I used to be disciplined to a fault. I'd work 30 hours straight and not sleep or eat and barely stop to pee," she says. "But I don't do that anymore. Sometimes it takes almost dying to realize that life is very short." *Continued on next page* ➔



"I still have moments when I think about what would have happened if I hadn't gotten help when I did." —Sara Abbott

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The smarter health move:

"Shortness of breath should never be ignored," Dr. Pines says, since it can point to anything from pneumonia to a heart attack. And neither should consistent or severe pain anywhere. If you walk around on a sprain, muscle tear or—worse—a hairline fracture or broken bone, you can cause lasting damage, says Dr. Pines. And if you're having sudden severe abdominal pain, it's important for young women to get medical help fast; it could be a ruptured ovarian cyst or potentially life-threatening ectopic pregnancy.



NOTHING TO SHIFF AT
Sometimes a simple cold can turn serious.

✓ A Really Bad Sore Throat

Many women push through throat soreness simply because it's so common, says Jerome Hoffman, M.D., professor of emergency medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles. "But occasionally, what seems like a simple sore throat can

be something else," he says. That's exactly what 34-year-old Jenny Storer discovered. She got an intense sore throat that kept getting worse, not better, but she was so busy that she didn't want to take even an hour to see a doctor. "I just gargled and used throat sprays to numb the pain," she

says. "My boss was away in Europe at the time, and honestly, I thought things would fall apart if I wasn't in the office." The pain kept getting worse until, five days later, Storer suddenly couldn't speak, and it became extremely hard to swallow. Still, she waited until nearly the end of the business day to finally drive herself to the emergency room, where she was told she had epiglottitis, a rare but potentially deadly inflammation of the flap of tissue that covers your windpipe.

She needed an emergency procedure to clear her airway, or she was about to lose the ability to *breathe*, not just speak. "The doctor told me to sit down, open wide and tilt my head back," says Storer. "Then, without any sedation or painkillers—they kept telling me there was no time—he slashed the pocket of infection in the back of my throat with a scalpel and let it drain. It was one of the scariest, grossest things I have ever experienced."

But she survived. "To think that because I didn't want to bother anyone about my sore throat, I could have simply stopped breathing any minute is still very scary to me," she says. "Now I go directly to the doctor with anything more than an obvious common cold."

The smarter health move:

Although Storer's situation was an extreme one, experts say it underscores an important lesson for any busy young woman: "It's not a good idea to ignore a severe symptom, or a combination of symptoms, like a sore throat and an inability to swallow," says Dr. Hoffman. "The longer you wait, the more likely it is that you'll have dangerous consequences." ■

And 10 More Symptoms That Need Attention Fast

Unsure whether your ailment warrants a doctor visit—or even a trip to the E.R.?

Our experts stressed that every case is different, but these general guidelines for some common symptoms can help you get the care you need. (If you're really in doubt, call your doctor first.)

SEE YOUR DOCTOR FOR...

Chronic gas or bloating: Signs of food sensitivities, irritable bowel syndrome, celiac disease or other issues

Recurring headaches: Could be chronic migraines, which may require treatment

Minor but recurring dizziness: Possibly anemia or low blood pressure

Chest congestion: Could be a cold, flu or other respiratory infection

Burning when you urinate or a feeling of having to go often: Likely a urinary tract infection (UTI) or bladder infection

GO TO THE E.R. FOR...

Sudden and severe abdominal pain: Could point to a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy or appendicitis

Sudden head pain, possibly with fever or neck stiffness: Symptoms of things like aneurysm or meningitis

Double vision, tingling or extreme dizziness: Signs of serious conditions such as brain tumors or stroke

Shortness of breath or chest pain: Symptoms of cardiovascular events like an embolism or heart attack

Classic UTI symptoms combined with fever, body aches or back pain: May indicate a dangerous kidney infection

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