

Infection Control Strategies for Influenza

There are several infection control strategies that should be part of common practice at all times. These strategies include good hand hygiene, covering your mouth, staying home when ill, and cleaning the environment. Reinforcing these strategies will help to prevent transmission of viruses.

Hand Hygiene: Handwashing and Hand Sanitizers

Handwashing is the most effective way of preventing infections, including influenza.

Hands should be washed or sanitized:

- after coughing, sneezing or blowing the nose;
- after shaking hands;
- before eating;
- before putting contact lenses in eyes;
- before touching the eyes, nose or mouth.

Frequent hand washing with soap and water, or the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, are both very effective at removing viruses on the hands. These help to limit the spread of infections. Appropriate hand washing involves the use of liquid soap and warm running water, rubbing the hands together for at least 20 seconds. Effective hand sanitizers contain alcohol and work by rubbing a quarter size amount over the hands until dry. When possible, hands should be washed or hand sanitizers used after shaking hands to prevent introduction of virus from the hands into the mouth, nose or eyes.

Covering the Mouth when Sneezing and Coughing

Covering the mouth when sneezing and coughing, followed by handwashing or hand sanitizing, can help to limit the spread of infection to others. Coughing or sneezing into your elbow or upper arm avoids contaminating hands. Tissues should be readily available for use on runny noses or to cough or sneeze into. Hands should be washed or sanitized after touching contaminated tissues.

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Staying Home from Work, School or Child Care Centres if Ill

Staying away from others is important when ill, as this helps prevent the spread of infection. Staying home when contagious should become a common practice and is a sign of respect for others. Influenza is considered contagious for 7 days in adults and 10 days in children. Colleagues and classmates should encourage their peers to go home if feeling unwell. While at home, it is important to minimize contact with household members, cover your cough and wash your hands to reduce the possibility of spread.

In the workplace, it is a good idea to have alcohol hand sanitizers readily available for use in common areas and on desktops. Schools or child care centres should consider the use of hand sanitizers in classrooms and playgrounds. The use of hand sanitizers should be supervised with younger children.

Cleaning the Environment

Some viruses and bacteria can survive in the environment for long periods of time. For example, the influenza virus can survive on hard surfaces for 24 to 48 hours. It can also survive for 8 to 12 hours on cloth, paper and tissues. Frequent cleaning of the environment can help reduce the chance of a person picking up a virus or bacteria from a contaminated surface. Cleaning should be done with a common household disinfectant, or a bleach solution (1 teaspoon bleach to 2 cups water), and special attention should be paid to commonly touched areas such as door handles, hand railings, light switches, and telephone receivers.

Computers, especially those intended for multiple users, should be cleaned and disinfected periodically. Turn off the computer and monitor, and use a cloth dampened with 70-90% isopropyl alcohol to wipe clean the keyboard and mouse.

For more information, contact the Middlesex-London Health Unit at 519-663-5317 ext. 2330 or visit the website at www.healthunit.com

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