

LaGrange County Health Department Nursing Office

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Taking Care of a Sick Person in Your Home

Novel H1N1 flu virus infection can cause a wide range of symptoms, including fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhea and vomiting associated with novel H1N1 flu. Like seasonal flu, novel H1N1 flu in humans can vary in severity from mild to severe. Severe disease with pneumonia, respiratory failure and even death is possible with novel H1N1 flu infection. Certain groups might be more likely to develop a severe illness from novel H1N1 flu infection, such as pregnant women and persons with chronic medical conditions. Sometimes bacterial infections may occur at the same time as or after infection with influenza viruses and lead to pneumonias, ear infections, or sinus infections.

The following information can help you provide safer care at home for sick persons during a flu outbreak or flu pandemic.

How Flu Spreads

The main way that influenza viruses are thought to spread is from person to person in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby. Influenza viruses may also be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

People with novel H1N1 flu who are cared for at home should:

- Check with their health care provider about any special care they might need if they are pregnant or have a health condition such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma, or emphysema.
- Check with their health care provider about whether they should take antiviral medications.

- Keep away from others as much as possible. This is to keep from making others sick. Do not go to work or school while ill.
- Stay home for at least 24 hours after fever is gone, except to seek medical care or for other necessities. Fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medication.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink clear liquids such as water, broth, sports drinks and electrolyte beverages for infants. This will help you from becoming dehydrated.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and throw tissue in the garbage after use. Wash hands after coughing and sneezing.
- Wear a face mask, if available and tolerable, when sharing common spaces with other household members to help prevent spreading the virus to others. This is especially important if other household members are at high risk for complications from influenza.

Medications to Help Lessen Symptoms of the Flu

Antiviral medications can sometimes help lessen influenza symptoms, but require a prescription. Most people do not need these antiviral drugs to fully recover from the flu. However, persons at higher risk for severe flu complications, or those with severe flu illness who require hospitalization, might benefit from antiviral medications. Antiviral medications are available for persons 1 year of age and older. Ask your health care provider whether you need antiviral medications.

Warning! Do not give aspirin or aspirin containing products to children or teenagers who have the flu; this can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome. This includes Pepto Bismol.

- **Check ingredient labels on over-the-counter cold and flu medications to see if they contain aspirin.**
- **Children 5 years and older and teenagers with the flu can take medications without aspirin, such as Tylenol, Ibuprofen, Motrin and Nuprin, to relieve symptoms.**
- **Children younger than 4 years of age should NOT be given over the counter cold medications without first speaking to a health care provider.**

- **The safest care for the flu symptoms in children younger than 2 years of age is using a cool-mist humidifier and a suction bulb to help clear away mucus.**
- **Fevers and aches can be treated with Tylenol, Ibuprofen, Motrin or Nuprin.**
- **Over the counter cold and flu medications used according to the package instructions may help lessen some symptoms such as cough and congestion. Importantly, these medications will not lessen how infectious a person is.**
- **Check the ingredients on the package label to see if the medication already contains Tylenol or Ibuprofen before taking additional doses of these medications, do not double dose!**

When to Seek Emergency Care

In children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but return with fever and worse cough

In adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough

Steps to Lessen the Spread of Flu in the Home

When providing care to a housebound member who is sick with influenza, the most important ways to protect yourself and others who are not sick are to:

- Keep the sick person away from other people as much as possible especially others who are at high risk for complications from influenza.
- Remind the sick person to cover their coughs, and clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub often, especially after coughing and/or sneezing.
- Have everyone in the household clean their hands often.
- Ask your health care provider if household contacts of the sick person, particularly those contacts who may be pregnant or have chronic health conditions, should take antiviral medications to prevent the flu.
- If you are in a high risk group for complications from influenza, you should attempt to avoid close contact (within 6 feet) with household members who are sick with influenza. If a close contact with a sick individual is unavoidable, consider wearing a facemask, if available and tolerable. Infants should NOT be cared for by sick family members!

Placement of the Sick Person

- Keep the sick person in a room separate from the common areas of the house. For example, a spare bedroom with its own bathroom, if that's possible. Keep the sickroom door closed.
- Unless necessary for medical care or other necessities, people who are sick with influenza-like-illness should stay home and keep away from others as much as possible, including avoiding travel, for at least 24 hours after fever is gone on its own without fever-reducing medication. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.
- Have the sick person wear a facemask, if available and tolerable. If they need to be in a common area of the home.
- If possible, sick people should use a separate bathroom. This bathroom should be cleaned daily with household disinfectant.

Protect Other Persons in the Home

- The sick person should NOT have visitors other than care givers. A phone call is safer than a visit.

- If possible, have only one adult in the home take care of the sick person. People at increased risk of severe illness from flu should NOT be the care giver, if possible.
- If you are in a high risk group for complications from Influenza, you should attempt to avoid close contact (within 6 feet) with household members who are sick with influenza. If close contact with a sick individual is unavoidable, consider wearing a facemask, if available and tolerable.
- Avoid having pregnant women care for the sick person. Pregnancy puts you at an increased risk of influenza-related complications and immunity can be suppressed during pregnancy.
- Avoid having sick family members care for infants and other groups at high risk for complications of influenza.
- All persons in the household should clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub frequently, including after every contact with the sick person or the person's room or bathroom.
- Use paper towels for drying hands after hand washing or dedicate cloth towels to each person in the household. For example, have different colored towels for each person.
- If possible, consideration should be given to maintaining good ventilation in shared household areas. For example, keeping windows open in restrooms, kitchens, etc.
- Antiviral medications can be used to prevent the flu, so check with your health care provider to see if some persons in the home should use them.

If You are the Caregiver

- Avoid being face to face with the sick person.
- When holding small children who are sick, place their chin on your shoulder so that they will not cough in your face.
- Clean your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand rub after you touch the sick person or handle used tissues, or laundry.
- Talk to your health care provider about taking antiviral medication to prevent you from getting the flu.
- If you are at high risk of influenza associated complications, you should not be the designated caretaker, if possible.

- If you are in a high risk group for complications from influenza, you should attempt to avoid close contact (within 6 feet) with household members who are sick with influenza. Designate a person who is not at high risk of flu complications as the primary caretaker of household members who are sick with influenza, if at all possible. If close contact with a sick individual is unavoidable, consider wearing a facemask, if available and tolerable.

Household Cleaning, Laundry, and Waste Disposal

- Throw away tissues and other disposable items used by the sick person in the trash. Wash your hands after touching used tissues and similar waste.
- Keep surfaces, especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, and toys for children, clean by wiping them down with a household disinfectant according to directions on the product label.
- Linens, eating utensils, and dishes belonging to those who are sick do not need to be cleaned separately, but importantly these items should not be shared without washing thoroughly first.
- Wash linens, such as bed sheets and towels, by using household laundry soap and tumble dry on a hot setting. Avoid “hugging” laundry prior to washing it to prevent contaminating yourself. Clean your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub right after handling dirty laundry
- Eating utensils should be washed either in a dishwasher or by hand with soap and water.