

## MDS Alert

### Infection Control: Snuff Out Sniffles During Cold & Flu Season

**Follow these preventive measures to combat germ-sharing in your facility.**

As you can probably tell from the coughing and sneezing echoing in your facility, cold and flu season is in full swing. But that doesn't mean you or your patients have to get sick.

Cause for concern: With all the attention focused on the potential for an Avian flu pandemic, many people overlook the importance of protecting themselves from the regular flu.

For instance, every year at least 200,000 Americans are likely hospitalized from influenza, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and as many as 36,000 people die due to flu complications.

So how can you stay flu-free? Follow this advice:

Be **ALittle Uptight About Hygiene**. You may know someone who always goes overboard with hand sanitizers or antibacterial soaps--and now is the time to follow suit.

Why? The flu is easily spread in closed quarters like offices and schools.

Action plan: Cut down your risk by washing your hands often and keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose, or mouth.

Vaccinate **The Kids First**. Elderly people and children are at the greatest risk for flu complications, but everyone will benefit from getting vaccinated.

Do it like this: You and your employees should inoculate your children to provide stronger protection against the virus for adults. Once the children are vaccinated, work on the adults.

Why? "Children have more influenza in their body when they get sick," explains **Dr. Kathleen Neuzil**, an immunization specialist at PATH, a public health advocacy group. This means they have more of the virus to spread around, especially when combined with children's poor hygiene. "When you have a flu outbreak, it's usually a school that gets closed," Neuzil notes.

Don't Stress Out. Despite highly publicized vaccine shortages in years past, the CDC has confirmed that there is enough of the flu vaccine to go around.

Another reason to calm down is chronic unnecessary stress can undermine the flu shot's effectiveness. "Our studies showed that people who have lots of stress going on in their lives have poorer responses to the influenza vaccination," says **Dr. Vikki Burns** of the University of Birmingham in England.

Surprising: Those who aren't worry-warts may respond better to the flu shot if they experience a brief flash of anxiety, such as when they wait in a long line for the shot. "Stress is only good for immune function if it is very brief, experienced immediately before vaccination," she says.

Just **Stay Home**. You know when you're getting sick, but if you're like most people, you go to work anyway. However, public health experts urge everyone to just stay home.

Why? You are more likely to spread the virus during those first days. "By staying home, you can protect against inadvertently infecting others," says Neuzil.

How to know: Flu symptoms feel similar to a common cold, but it makes you feel more miserable more quickly.

Don't **Stock Pile OTC Remedies**. Yes, there may be a run on over-the-counter antiviral medicines at your local drug store, but that doesn't mean you need to start hoarding.

These types of medicines must be taken within the first 48 hours of contracting the flu and, on average, only shorten your symptoms by one day. Also, "If you stockpile Tamiflu, you run the risk that someone who "really needs it can't get it," says Neuzil.

Better: Try to minimize your exposure to the virus. If you do contract it, keep Tylenol or Advil on hand, drink plenty of fluids, and allow your body to rest. With this strategy, you should be flu-free within a week.