Prevention of Influenza

Fortunately, we all have access to large amounts of excellent information about H1N1 flu from the news media and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

There are several reasons why H1N1 has caused so much concern. These include:

- The world has heightened awareness of the possibility of dangerous pandemics because of prior news about avian flu.
- At first, H1N1 appeared to have a higher death rate than seasonal flu. Fortunately, so far this has not turned out to be the case.
- All new influenza strains can spread through populations rapidly and extensively because there is no pre-existing immunity from past exposure or vaccines. This creates the possibility of many cases and much suffering, even if the percentage of cases that are fatal is not higher than for seasonal flu.

It’s clear that we should all think about our options for avoiding both H1N1 and seasonal flu. The three most effective prevention strategies are vaccination, preventing droplet transmission, and staying home if you are sick. Taken together, these three prevention strategies can be highly effective.

1. **Receive the Vaccine**
   JLab Occupational Medicine will offer the H1N1 vaccine as soon as we are able to obtain it. At first, Public Health authorities might restrict vaccine to high risk groups. These include:
   - Healthcare workers.
   - Pregnant women.
   - People who live with, or care for, children younger than six months of age.
   - People who have certain chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease.

2. **Prevent Droplet Transmission**
   a. **Social Distancing**: One of the two primary modes of transmission is by droplets of secretions that are produced by coughing or sneezing. These droplets fall out of the air in less than six feet. Individual virus particles are so small that they can remain suspended in air. However, flu isn’t easily spread by viral particles themselves, but rather by much larger droplets that contain numerous particles each. That’s why more than six
feet of separation isn’t needed and why indoor air handling systems don’t transmit flu. Masks and respirators are of limited value.

b. **Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze:** Before you cough or sneeze, try to walk away from others, then face away and use a tissue or your clothing.

c. **Stay home when you are sick:**
   - If you are at work when you first realize you might be ill, go home immediately (remember to inform your supervisor). It’s especially important to avoid work if you have a fever, body aches or a sore throat because these symptoms tend to occur during more infectious phases of illness.
   - If you are sick with flu-like symptoms we ask that you contact Occupational Medicine at 269-7539. Knowing how many people are out sick will help management make better informed plans and decisions.
   - These symptoms should be completely resolved for at least 24 hours before you return to work. Call Occupational Medicine if you need advice about the timing of your return to work.

3. **Prevent hand transmission:** The second primary mode of transmission is by hands. Train yourself now to avoid touching your mouth and face. Keep that good habit the rest of your life.
   a. Thoroughly wash your hands as often as you can. Use enough soap to create suds on all surfaces of both hands. Rub all parts of your hands for several seconds. Rinse thoroughly. The full process should take at least 20 seconds. Technique is important, but type of soap isn’t. All soaps are equally effective for flu prevention.
   b. Typical antibacterial soaps are no better than standard soaps because flu is a virus, not a bacterium. However, alcohol based hand sanitizers are excellent. They kill all viruses. Proper technique is to cover all surfaces of both hands and then let the sanitizer evaporate.

Finally, flu epidemics can make continuity of operations at work difficult. This is an appropriate time for work groups to discuss options for managing periods of high absenteeism. Engage your supervisor in these discussions. ESH&Q Emergency Planning and Occupational Medicine are available to answer your questions.