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Health Department

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September 29, 2009

## Caring for H1N1 Patients

### What do I need to know about caring for someone with H1N1 in my home?

Caring for someone with H1N1 is much like caring for anyone who has a contagious illness, whether it be the seasonal flu, a cold or strep throat. To help alleviate fears, the following fact sheet has been created to provide you with tips for caring for ill family members in your home.

Please check with your health care provider if you are caring for people in your home who may have the H1N1 influenza virus and are pregnant or have a health condition such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma, or emphysema. He/she may give you special instructions including prescribing antiviral medication.

### What are antiviral medications?

Antiviral medication is used to lessen the severity of influenza symptoms, however, most people do not need to take these drugs to fully recover from the flu. Persons at higher risk for severe flu complications or those with severe illness who require hospitalization may benefit from antiviral medication. Antiviral medications are available for persons one year of age and older, and are most effective if taken within 48 hours of symptom onset.

### Are there over-the-counter medications that can help?

Over-the-counter cold and flu medications can be given to individuals over the age of four, however medications containing aspirin should **not** be given to children or teenagers. This is because aspirin can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome in children and teens. Check ingredient labels on over-the-counter cold and flu medication to see if they contain aspirin.

Children five years of age and older (including teenagers) can take medication without aspirin, such as acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol), ibuprofen (e.g., Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g., Aleve) in order to relieve symptoms.

These medications will not lessen how infectious a person is. Persons with kidney disease or stomach problems should check with their health care provider before taking nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories. The safest care for flu symptoms in young children is to use a cool-mist humidifier and a suction bulb to help clear away mucus.

### When should I seek emergency medical care?

Seek medical care right away if an ill person has any of the following symptoms:

- Difficulty breathing or chest pain
- Purple or blue discoloration of the lips
- Severe vomiting
- Dehydration (dizziness when standing, absence of urination, or in infants, a lack of tears when crying)
- Confusion or is generally less responsive than normal

### How can I protect myself and others in my home?

If possible, have only one adult in the home take care of the ill person(s). People at increased risk of severe illness from the flu should not be the designated caregiver; this includes pregnant women. Other suggestions include:

- Avoid close contact (within six feet) and being face-to-face with the ill person. If this is not possible, consider wearing a face mask or respirator, if available and tolerable.
- When holding small children who are ill, place their chin on your shoulder so that they will not cough in your face.
- All persons in the home should clean their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer frequently, including after every contact with the ill person or the person's room/bathroom or laundry.
- Use paper towels for drying hands after hand washing or dedicate towels to each person in the household.
- Monitor all household members for flu symptoms.
- If symptoms develop and you have concerns, contact your health care provider.



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### Where is the best place in my home to care for a sick individual?

If at all possible, keep the ill person in a "sick room." This room should be separate from the common areas of the house. Keep the door to that room closed as often as possible. If the sick individual needs to be in a common area of the house near other family members, have the ill person wear a face mask if available and tolerable.

If possible, designate a "sick bathroom" as well. This bathroom should be cleaned daily with household disinfectant. Unless necessary for medical care or other necessities, keep the ill person at home and away from others as much as possible for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone (without using fever-reducing medication).

The only reason the ill individual should leave the home is to seek medical care. If this is the case, have him/her wear a face mask or respirator, if available and tolerable. Ask the ill person to cover his/her mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing with a tissue or into their elbow. The ill person should not have visitors other than caregivers.

### Should I handle household cleaning, laundry and waste disposal differently?

- The ill individual should throw away tissues and other disposable items he/she uses in a trashcan. The caregiver should wash his/her hands after taking the trash out.
- Keep surfaces 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 ill do not need to be cleaned separately however, these items should not be shared without being thoroughly washed with soap and water.
- Wash bed sheets and towels with 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 an alcohol-based hand sanitizer immediately after handling an ill person's dirty laundry.

### How can I get more information?

For more information on H1N1, call the Sedgwick County Health Department at 660-5558 or email [flu@sedgwick.gov](mailto:flu@sedgwick.gov).