

The Connection™

July 27, 2009



Hal Temkin

Cover Your Cough

Over this past weekend, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an estimate that "Hundreds of thousands of Americans could die of Swine Flu (H1N1) over the next two years if the vaccine being developed for this Influenza is not effective or if enough vaccine is not available for everyone, and at the pandemic's peak as much as 40% of the work force could be affected".

The estimates are not based on an enhanced lethality of the new H1N1 virus but rather on the lack of resistance to the virus in the general population and its continuing spread through the summer months when flu viruses normally become quiet. Reports from the World Health Organization (WHO) show H1N1 infections occurring and being transmitted all over the world.

Almost simultaneously, we received the following from Gina Pugliese, our good friend and one of the nation's leading infection control experts. Gina is Vice President of the Premier Safety Institute and offered these excellent suggestions on a few of the ways we can possibly avoid passing the virus around. We thank Premier for permission to copy this message to you and we hope you will send it to your population, friends and family. The ideas are simple, easily trainable and even include posters that you can print-out and post.

Who has time to cover their cough? Where is my tissue?

CDC's guidance for preventing the spread of novel (A H1N1) influenza includes covering your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, throwing the tissue in the trash after you use it and then washing your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand cleaners. For one example see [CDC's guidance to workers](#). But, who really has a tissue handy when you feel you are about to cough or sneeze? What should you do?

We know that influenza virus (seasonal and novel H1N1) may be spread to others when a person coughs on their hands and then touches nearby surfaces, which are soon after touched by someone else who may pick up the virus on their hands and touch their own mucous membranes.

Who has tissue?

Look around. Who really has a tissue handy for a cough or sneeze? People are sneezing on their hands all the time.

We also know that seasonal flu and novel H1N1 can be most easily transmitted before the onset of symptoms and during the first few days of illness, with infectivity tapering off after that. Therefore, coughing into our hands before we feel ill enables us to transmit the flu virus without realizing it.

What should we do? Cough into your sleeve!

CDC's Division of Healthcare Quality Promotion has published "Respiratory Hygiene-Cough Etiquette" that includes directions to cough or sneeze in your sleeve if you don't have a tissue to prevent the transmission of all respiratory infectious agents, including seasonal flu virus. CDC also suggests that this practice be part of the standard precautions that should be used on all patients. CDC even provides signs that show you how to "COVER YOUR COUGH" so you can also send the message graphically as you tell everyone about it. The signs describe how to cover your cough and sneeze either with a tissue, if handy, or cough into your sleeve.

Why not use the same cough etiquette all the time and everywhere - in the hospital, in the airports, in the home, at parties, at work, in an elevator, in the grocery store, in schools?

"Cover Your Cough" message is missing from CDC's guidance on the prevention of novel H1N1

This practical message to "**Cover your Cough**" is absent from many public health messages specifically addressing the prevention of novel H1N1, messages that focus only on using a tissue for coughs and sneezes. So, unfortunately, many aren't aware of the "**Cover your Cough**" technique.

Let's tell everyone!

Let's do our part and reduce the risk of seasonal and novel H1N1 flu transmission. Spread the word - not flu - and tell your friends, family, co-workers how to "**Cover Your Cough**" and sneeze either into a tissue (if handy), or cough into their sleeve. See cartoon at link below as well as more information and signs from [CDC](#).

What to do in the healthcare setting

- **Post signs about "Cover Your Cough".** CDC recommends posting signs about "Cough Etiquette" at entrances to outpatient facilities, such as emergency departments, physician offices, and outpatient clinics. Cough Etiquette includes covering coughs and sneezes either with a tissue, if handy, or coughing into a sleeve.
- **Educate patients and family about "Cover Your Cough".** Patients and persons who accompany them should be told to inform healthcare personnel of symptoms of a respiratory infection when they first register for care. They should also be taught **Cough Etiquette**. Healthcare facilities (and other public places where people congregate) should provide tissues, waste receptacles for used tissue disposal, handwashing supplies and/or conveniently located dispensers of alcohol hand rubs.

Downloads and links

- Guidance for the workplace <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance/workplace.htm>
- Respiratory Hygiene/Cough Etiquette Signs from CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/covercough.htm>
- More information and materials are available from the [Premier Safety Institute's Influenza-Seasonal](#) web site

If you have any questions, please call Hal Temkin at: 312-226-0400 ext. 5704.

To view past Connections, [click here](#).

