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Tips for Caregivers During a Flu Pandemic

Even though health officials are not sure when or where the next wave of influenza (flu) will occur, there are practical steps you can take to cope with a flu outbreak in your community. The following are things to consider that may prevent the spread of the flu virus and tips to help caregivers if a family member becomes ill.

Identifying flu symptoms

A flu virus can cause a number of symptoms, including:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Headache
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting

Flu symptoms usually begin one to three days after being in contact with the virus. This means that people may unknowingly spread the virus before their symptoms are noticed.

The flu virus is spread through droplets from coughs and sneezes. These droplets may be propelled through the air or caught in a hand, then transferred to objects such as door handles, light switches, etc. Some flu viruses can live for more than two hours.

The severity of the flu can vary from country to country as well as from person to person. Many flu strains cause only mild symptoms for most healthy adults. However, the flu can cause serious and even life-threatening illness in some children, older individuals as well as people with existing health conditions.

Caring for sick family members

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Since public health experts currently suggest that over 50 percent of individuals who contract pandemic flu can be cared for at home, the following are some general guidelines around caring for a person sick with flu:

- **Check with their health care provider.** If the ill person is pregnant or has a health condition such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma, or emphysema and ensure you have enough of their prescription medication on hand.

- **Prevent dehydration**. Have the sick person drink plenty of clear fluids (water, broth, sports drinks) to keep from becoming dehydrated (which can be caused by vomiting or diarrhea).

- **Self-isolation.** Anyone with flu symptoms should stay home for 7 days after symptoms begin or until symptom-free for 24 hours. Also, if possible, have the sick person stay in a separate room with the door closed.

- **Get plenty of rest.** Ensure both the sick person and the caregiver get plenty of rest.

- **Monitor the illness.** Check the individual's temperature, fluid and food intake at least once or twice a day. Consider writing this down in a log with the date, time and any medications they've taken. This may be useful if you need to provide details to a health care professional.

- **Practice effective hygiene.** The ill person should, as much as possible, cough and sneeze into a tissue and immediately dispose of the tissue.

- **Supplies.** Have on hand soap or alcohol-based hand wash, tissues, medicines for fevers, water and other fluids.

- **Warning!** Do not give Aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) to children or teenagers who have the flu; this can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome.

Watch for warning signs of complications. Since influenza can sometimes cause severe dehydration or lead to other illnesses such as pneumonia, ear or sinus infections, it is important to know the signs that indicate the ill person should seek expert medical care:

- Dehydration (e.g., absence of urination, dizziness, a lack of tears);
- Wheezing or difficulty breathing;
- Chest pain;
- Purple or blue discoloration of the lips;
- Seizures;
- Vomiting and unable to keep liquids down;
- Newly developed bloody or colored sputum;
- A fever that persists up to two or three days;
- Drowsy, confused or difficult to awaken.

Preventing further illness

To help prevent the spread of the flu within your home, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest the following:

- Designate one person as the sole caregiver. Frequently wash hands with warm water and soap or an alcohol-based hand cleanser.
- Cough and sneeze into a tissue or your sleeve to prevent the spread of germs.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth unless your hands are freshly washed.
- Regularly clean hard surfaces—such as kitchen and bathroom countertops, phones, computer keyboards, doorknobs—with disinfecting cleaner.
- Maintain good air circulation in shared household areas (e.g., keep windows open in washrooms, kitchen, bedrooms, etc.).
- Avoid sharing personal belongings (e.g., toothbrushes, pens, clothes, towels, sheets, blankets, eating utensils, etc.)
- Wash everyone's dishes and clothes separately using very hot water and soap.
- Consider having family members use paper towels for drying hands or a dedicated cloth towel for each person.
- When you must have close contact with the sick person, consider wearing disposable gloves and/or a facemask.
- Always thoroughly wash hands after contact with the ill person and/or their personal items.

Helping your family cope during a flu outbreak

A serious or long-term flu pandemic may have a major impact on your family, work and social life. For example, individuals and families may need to isolate themselves in their home if one or a number of family members are ill with the flu. This may cause feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and even helplessness. It may also change the usual family dynamic. While a crisis situation can bring some families closer together, for others, the isolation and worry may cause individuals to become withdrawn or angry.

While everyone reacts differently, based on his or her own personality, cultural beliefs and life experience, to emotionally weather a flu pandemic, it is important to build your emotional resilience so you can use your energy to fight the virus instead of responding to stress.

Consider these tips:

- Maintain an optimistic outlook. Focus on your strength, resourcefulness and abilities and view the flu pandemic as a temporary situation that will pass. This is particularly important if you have children, because they sense your anxiety and fear.
- Continue normal family routines as much as possible under the circumstances to help provide a sense of comfort and stability.
- Be tolerant of each other since anxiety affects each individual in the family.
- Stay connected with friends and family through telephone or email.
- Stay informed. Keep up-to-date on pandemic developments by checking regularly with a reliable source of information the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Seek solace in established comforts, favorite games, books, hobbies, discussions with others.

What to expect from children and teens

Children and teens may react to the flu pandemic by having nightmares, being withdrawn or even angry. While children are keenly aware of their environment, they may not talk about their anxiety, but may act it out. Try to:

- Listen and affirm your child’s feelings without judgment.
- Reassure them that the adults are coping and doing everything they can to keep the family healthy and safe.
- Provide age-appropriate factual information and answers to their questions about the flu.
- Watch for signs of stress, such as reverting to thumb-sucking or bedwetting.

Support for the caregiver

Keep fit. Those who take on the task of caregiving during a flu pandemic need to stay physically and emotionally fit, since this can be an isolating and difficult role.

To build resilience, try to:

- Be sure to eat a healthy diet, get as much rest as possible and try to exercise or at least stretch out muscles that may become tense due to stress.
- Monitor yourself and other family members for flu symptoms.
- Find healthy ways of managing your stress. This may include setting aside time each day to, for example: quietly face your worries (write them down or talk on the phone to a close friend or family member); practice yoga; find a quiet place to read undisturbed, etc.

You can access additional information and support from your physician or a professional. Your local public health department is another reliable resource who can help you to stay informed on the latest updates in your community.