



Close-Up

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The Activity Professionals' Role in Preventing the Spread of Colds and Flu

The holidays are approaching quickly and so is cold and flu season. As activity professionals, we need to make sure we are not responsible for spreading colds and influenza to the residents, volunteers and interdisciplinary team. All health care workers should be proactive and protect the residents and others by getting immunized against this year's common flu strain combined with protection from H1N1 influenza, which promises a return again this year.

Influenza is a contagious respiratory disease that can cause substantial illness and death among long term care residents and illness for the staff and volunteers. The largest outbreaks of flu usually occur between December and March. Sample in-service questions are included at the end of this article. These can be used for training your staff and volunteers.

Having health care personnel, volunteers and residents get an influenza vaccination, combined with basic infection control practices and proper hand hygiene, can help prevent the transmission of colds and the flu. However, since influenza outbreaks can still occur among highly vaccinated populations, the interdisciplinary team should be prepared to monitor the residents, volunteers and each other for signs of colds and influenza. When suspected cases occur, the staff should promptly initiate measures to control the spread of the flu and colds within the facility.

Establishing Department Protocols

Meet with your staff and volunteers to discuss the best ways to prevent the spread of colds and flu in the facility. Instruct them to stay home when they feel ill. If a fever is present, the individual must see a doctor for diagnosis and treatment. Anyone who is diagnosed with the flu should not return to work without a doctor's note stating that it is all right for the individual to resume his or her duties. The staff and volunteers exhibiting cold symptoms should remain at home for at least five days following the onset of symptoms.

Implement established infection control procedures for the activity department. Ask one of the nurses to provide an in-service for your staff and volunteers on proper hand-washing techniques. Instruct the participants to demonstrate these techniques in front of the nurse. Through this return-demonstration technique, the activity staff and volunteers will feel more confident and can receive pointers for improvement.

Since soap and hot water are not always available, have the nurse demonstrate the proper way to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Make sure your staff and volunteers have access to an alcohol-based sanitizer **at all times**. It is a good idea to provide pocket-size bottles for everyone on your staff and all your volunteers.

Keep hand sanitizer, Lysol or Clorox wipes, paper towels, boxes of tissues, and a bottle of disinfecting spray on each activity cart. Ask the housekeeping department to supply your staff with an appropriate disinfectant in a spray bottle for cleaning the tables and chairs after an activity. This should be used to disinfect all hard surfaces the residents touched. Whenever your staff returns from doing an activity, they should disinfect all props and supplies used during the activity and wipe down the activity cart with the bottled disinfecting spray solution.

Props and other supplies used by the residents during activities will need to be disinfected when your staff or volunteers return to the activity department. To disinfect game pieces, checkers, poker chips, crochet hooks, paint brushes, etc. you will need to wash the items in hot, soapy water first. Drain the soapy water and rinse the items in a bleach solution before placing them in a drainer. Put one gallon of warm water in a **clean** basin and add one tablespoon of bleach. Immerse the items in this solution for at least 10 minutes, remove the items to a clean drainer, and allow them to air dry.

Dishes, cutlery, cutting boards, pots and pans, etc. that are used during activities should be sent to the dietary department to be washed in its commercial dishwasher. Tablecloths, parachutes, towels, stuffed toys, and other cloth items should be sent to the laundry department to be washed and dried in its commercial washing machines. Don't try to wash them yourselves as the commercial laundry equipment uses much hotter water than home-based washers and dryers.

Game boards, books, decks of cards, and other items that can't be immersed in water should be wiped with a fresh disposable disinfecting wipe (such as Lysol or Clorox disinfecting wipes) and left to dry thoroughly on a clean, dry surface before putting the item(s) away. Items can be placed on clean newspapers, because bacteria cannot live on newsprint.

Following all activities held in the activity center, the tables and chairs should be wiped down using a bottle of disinfecting spray. Use a clean paper towel to wipe each table and chair dry. The staff should repeat this process on their desks at least once a week, and more often if someone in the department becomes ill. Keep a box of alcohol pads by each phone in the department. (You can get these pads through the nursing department – these pads are the ones used to cleanse the skin before an injection.) After anyone uses the phone, they should be instructed to use an alcohol pad to clean the receiver and ear piece immediately after ending their conversation.

Protecting the Residents

To maintain the residents' ability to socialize and have access to group activities when influenza infections have not been present, the staff and volunteers can safely lead group activities by following a few precautions. Place residents with symptoms of respiratory infections three to six feet from other residents. Remind these residents to use a tissue to cover their cough and to dispose of the tissue in the proper receptacles.

Do not invite residents who show obvious signs of a cold or flu to participate in group activities, especially if the resident is unable to comprehend and comply with respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette due to dementia. Provide one-to-one activities for these residents for as long as symptoms persist. **DO NOT** bring any items into these residents' rooms that can't be left when the visit is over and then discarded when the resident is fully recovered. Items such as board games, playing cards, checkers, balls, books, magazines, parachutes, stuffed toys, etc.

can easily become contaminated by residents who are ill. The activity staff can then spread the resident's cold or flu to the next resident who handles these items unless all activity props and supplies are disinfected each time the item is handled by a resident.

Suspend large group activities that necessitate moving residents to large common areas when there are confirmed cases of colds and flu on specific floors or units. Encourage your staff to limit activity programs to the floor or unit where they are assigned and to refrain from going onto the other floors or units until the majority of residents diagnosed with colds and/or flu have recovered. It is also recommended that the activity staff and volunteers limit the use of props and games that require items to be passed from one resident to another until the crisis is over.

When visiting an ill resident, the activity staff should wash their hands prior to entering the room and immediately after leaving the resident's room. When the resident has a productive cough, the activity staff should wear disposable masks while in the resident's room. The disposable mask should be discarded in the proper infection control receptacle outside the resident's room as the staff member leaves the room. Instruct your staff to sit at least three to six feet from the resident if at all possible. The activity staff should leave any activity supplies or props brought for the activity in the resident's room for the resident to use while he or she is ill. These items should be properly disposed of once the resident has recovered. This is done to prevent contamination of another resident. It's probably best that volunteers **do not** interact with residents who are ill, especially if the volunteer is also an elder.

Send letters to the local schools, scout troops, civic organizations, and church groups who regularly visit during the holidays (a sample is provided near the end of this article). Explain how important it is to protect the residents from exposure to colds and flu. Ask the teachers and group leaders to make sure children who are not feeling well are not included in any group scheduled to visit the nursing home. Adults with respiratory symptoms should not visit the facility for five days following the onset of symptoms and children with symptoms should not visit for at least 10 days following the onset of the illness.

It is also a good idea to ask visiting groups to refrain from bringing homemade "goodies" for the residents to enjoy. Encourage the groups to bring fruit, packaged cookies, small boxes of soft candies, or pocket-size packets of tissues instead.

In Conclusion

The best prevention to keep from spreading colds and flu within the facility is to wash your hands, wash your hands and wash your hands!!! This should be done immediately before contact with residents and immediately following contact with residents.

For posters instructing staff and volunteers in proper hand-washing techniques, visit: http://www.who.int/gpsc/5may/How_To_HandWash_Poster.pdf. For a poster showing the proper technique for using alcohol-based hand sanitizer, visit: http://www.who.int/gpsc/5may/How_To_HandRub_Poster.pdf.

Don't forget to include your volunteers in the infection control and hand hygiene in-services. All prevention guidelines developed for the activity department should be shared with the volunteers. Rules put in place for the staff should hold true for the volunteers as well. Educating your volunteers about the potential dangers of colds and flu for the elderly is essential.

Many activity professionals and volunteers feel an obligation to report to work even when they are feeling “under the weather.” Remind your staff and volunteers how dangerous this is for the residents. If one of your staff or a volunteer comes to work feeling ill, or develops symptoms during the work day, that staff member or volunteer should be sent home **immediately**.

Sample Letter to Groups

November 1, 2011

Ms. Gayle Simpson
Happy Town Elementary School
555 W. Third Street
Happy Town, IL 55555

Dear Ms. Simpson,

Thank you for scheduling a visit to sing carols for the residents at Happy Villa Nursing Home. The residents are looking forward to your visit on Friday, Dec. 3, 2011 at 3:00 p.m.

I'm sure you are aware of how contagious colds and influenza can be. The flu is especially dangerous for our elderly residents. In order to protect the residents, as well as the children visiting Happy Villa Nursing Home, we ask the following of you:

- ◆ Please do not bring any child exhibiting symptoms of the flu.
- ◆ Notify me if there is an outbreak of the flu at the school and you need to reschedule your visit.
- ◆ Please limit the children's direct contact with the residents this year.
- ◆ Do not bring handmade cards, ornaments, or other things for the children to give to the residents.

In turn, I will notify you if an outbreak of the flu happens at the nursing home. We can reschedule when the residents are feeling better.

Please explain to the children and their families why we must take these precautions and limit their contact with the residents.

Sincerely,

Myrtle Klauer,
Activity Director

Cold and Influenza
Pre/Post Test

Place a "T" for True or an "F" for False in front of each statement

- ___ 1. Since the activity department is made up of fewer staff than other departments in the facility, I should report to work unless I have a fever.
- ___ 2. Washing my hands frequently with an alcohol-based hand rub is one of the best ways of preventing the spread of colds and flu.
- ___ 3. An essential part of preparing for an activity is to wash the table, chair arms and seat with a disinfectant before inviting the residents to the activity.
- ___ 4. Residents with a cold or the flu cannot have their activity needs met until they are well and able to join the group.
- ___ 5. Before using a phone, I should wipe the receiver with an alcohol wipe.
- ___ 6. Tissues, an alcohol-based hand rub, and non-touch disposal container should be constantly available during an activity.
- ___ 7. If I have a cough or am sneezing, I should wear a mask when interacting with residents.
- ___ 8. I should wear a gown, gloves, and mask when providing activities to a resident who has an active cold or the flu.
- ___ 9. I don't need to change my mask, gown, or gloves until I have completed my rounds of 1:1 visits.
- ___ 10. During the cold and flu season, I should be careful not to pass props from one resident to another without disinfecting them first.
- ___ 11. I should cover my mouth and nose with a clean tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- ___ 12. If I begin feeling ill during my shift, I should return to the activity department, inform my supervisor and go home.
- ___ 13. It's not possible to spread the flu by simply touching your eyes, nose, or mouth during interactions with the residents.
- ___ 14. It's important to disinfect props, supplies, equipment, cards, etc. after using them in resident activities.
- ___ 15. During flu season, it's best to limit "assembly line" crafts and lending books and magazines to residents.
- ___ 16. Monitor direct contact with residents if you observe a child in the intergenerational program coughing or sneezing.
- ___ 17. This year, the entire staff must work together to protect the residents from the spread of colds and flu.

List at least five things you can do to help prevent the spread of colds and flu at your facility:
