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WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS

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An Ounce of Prevention....Advice for the Flu Season

The leaves are changing; there is a chill in the air. But something else is coming too, influenza. The influenza (“flu”) season is here. This year promises to be challenging not only for the run-of-the-mill flu, but because of the new strain called H1N1 or “Swine” Flu. Symptoms of the flu include fever over 100.4, muscle aches, sore throat, nasal drainage and/or congestion, cough. Occasionally vomiting and diarrhea have been reported.

The media has given a lot of attention to the Swine flu in recent news broadcasts and newspaper articles. Unfortunately, some of it, especially early on, was sensationalistic and alarmist. When the H1N1 strain first appeared in Mexico early this year, there was concern that this would be as bad as the Spanish flu of 1918 that killed millions. Fortunately, those fears were unfounded. Yes, it HAS reached pandemic stage. However, that only means that the virus has had worldwide spread.

This strain of flu appears to be no worse than any other strain, but that does not mean we need to let our guard down. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have identified certain people who are considered at high risk for serious complications from Swine flu. These include woman who are pregnant, children under age two, those with diabetes, cardiovascular or lung diseases, kidney disease, or immune compromised. Interestingly, older individuals appear to be somewhat protected as they may have previously seen a similar strain. Antiviral medications such as Tamiflu (when given in the first 48 hours of symptom onset) have been shown to be somewhat effective at decreasing severity and length of illness. However, they are expensive, can cause significant side effects/allergies, and are currently only recommended for those with severe symptoms or the above risk factors. They also do not prevent the spread of the disease.

There are steps that everyone can easily do to prevent catching or spreading the flu this winter. First, wash your hands. Use soap and warm water for at least 30 seconds (you can sing the ABCs song, or Happy Birthday twice for timing). The flu virus can be spread by contact with droplets left behind on surfaces like doorknobs, sinks, toilets, etc. You touch the surface, and then maybe you rub your eyes or nose, or go eat that ham and cheese for lunch. If you didn’t wash, you may contract the flu. The use of alcohol based hand sanitizers also has been shown to reduce the spread of influenza. Second, cover your cough if you become ill. Cough into a tissue and then dispose of the tissue and wash your hands. A better method is to cough into your sleeve. Third, and most importantly from a public health standpoint, if you fall ill and are not in one of the high risk groups, stay home. Fourth, when the vaccine becomes available, if you fall into the groups recommended to get vaccinated, get the vaccine. Get the normal seasonal flu vaccine as well.

The CDC recommends those who are proven or suspect they may have H1N1 stay home until they are fever free for 24 hours WITHOUT the use of fever reducing medications or 7 days, whichever is longer. I recommend that unless you are in a high risk group, or are having other symptoms such as difficulty breathing, fever of 104 or higher, or changes in mental status that patients stay home. Do NOT come to the ER or your doctor's office. This can increase the spread of the disease and potentially to people with risk factors. No one will ever be refused care, but if you do decide to come to the ER please be patient as wait times may increase due to the influx of others with similar symptoms and please wear a mask if offered one.

Employers need to develop a plan on how to handle the reduction in work force that will come from increased number of sick employees. Changes in "doctor's note" policy will be necessary as telling employees to get a doctor's note when they are sick will just increase the spread of the disease. Schools should develop plans to handle missing students and again relax the doctor's note requirements.

The Emergency Department at Jefferson Memorial Hospital is currently seeing a large volume of patients who think they may have Swine Flu. The increased volume has put a tremendous strain on the facility to see patients in a timely manner and waiting times have increased to near four hours at times. If you think you might have the flu and do not have any serious symptoms such as difficulty breathing, altered mental status, or one of the risk factors, please stay at home. Drink fluids, take Acetaminophen or Ibuprofen for fevers and muscle aches. Do not drink large amounts of fluid at one sitting if you feel nauseous or are vomiting. Sip fluids continually as the fluid will be absorbed rapidly and the smaller volume will prevent stomach distension which can worsen the vomiting.

The incubation period for influenza virus is about 48 hours from exposure. If you came in contact with someone with flu-like symptoms and four days later you are without symptoms, the chances are very slim that you will develop influenza.

Jefferson Memorial has instituted an influenza information line **304.724.3587**. Call this number for information on how to know if you have the flu and how to care for yourself and your family. If you do feel the need to come to the hospital, please be courteous to other patients and staff and wear a mask at all times when you are offered one. If you are visiting someone in the hospital, or are accompanying a patient to an appointment or the ED, and you have flu symptoms, please stay at home. JMH is recommending that no individuals under age 18 visit the hospital to prevent the spread of the virus to sick patients or pregnant women admitted to the hospital.

This flu season will be a challenge for all of us in the Eastern Panhandle. By using some common sense practices like good hand hygiene and staying home when ill, we can slow the spread of the flu and get through this together.

Steven Bauer, MD....Medical Director

Jefferson Memorial Hospital Emergency Department