

Reinforce Infection Control In Light of Coronavirus

The “COVID-19” coronavirus outbreak will put the spotlight on ways to limit the spread of respiratory infections.

This coronavirus is thought to be transmitted by respiratory secretions...similar to other coronaviruses, such as SARS and MERS.

Put the current risk in perspective to help calm worried patients...since it doesn't yet come close to the overall impact of seasonal influenza.

Over 35 MILLION patients got the flu last season...with about 500,000 hospitalizations and 34,000 deaths.

Emphasize getting a flu vaccine each year...and use this coronavirus outbreak as an opportunity to stress infection control.

Reinforce proper hand hygiene. Explain that frequent handwashing with soap and water is the best bet. Advise washing for 20 seconds...about the time it takes to sing the “Happy Birthday” song twice.

If that's not practical, suggest using a hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. They're effective against enveloped viruses, such as coronaviruses...but aren't yet proven to kill COVID-19.

Use a disinfectant spray or wipe on exam tables, phones, etc.

Clear up mask confusion. Caution that unnecessary use is leading to shortages. Plus masks only work along with hand hygiene.

Discourage masks for most people withOUT symptoms. Masks are too loose to keep all germs out...and viruses can get in through the eyes.

If patients ask about N95 respirators, point out these masks require fitting...and are hard to wear for more than a few minutes.

But it's okay if patients WITH respiratory symptoms want to wear a surgical mask to help contain secretions...especially if in contact with infants, elderly, or immunocompromised people.

And ask patients WITH respiratory symptoms to call before coming in...if they recently traveled to an outbreak area or had contact with a COVID-19 patient.

Expect the guidance for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 to evolve as we learn more.

3/13/20 - This article was revised to reflect the current population risk in North America. Please keep in mind that this is a rapidly changing landscape.

Key References:

- www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019 (2-26-20)
- www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html (2-26-20)
- www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/healthcare-supply-ppe.html (2-26-20)
- www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks (2-26-20)

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