

With seasonal flu upon us, it is important to understand best practices regarding influenza and preventing the spread of infection.

So, how can you ensure the health of your crew during influenza season? You can start by recognizing the signs and symptoms of it and arming yourself with prevention strategies.

## **WHAT, EXACTLY, IS INFLUENZA?**

Known commonly as the flu, influenza is a respiratory virus easily spread by droplets generated while coughing, sneezing or even talking. Those droplets can land on surfaces such as tables, hand rails, utensils, glassware and door knobs. When another person touches those surfaces and rubs his nose or eyes, he/she can 'self-inoculate' and introduce the virus into his mucous membranes.

Flu spread occurs in around winter. In the northern hemisphere, the onset of flu season usually begins in October and increases among the general population until early spring. Meanwhile, the southern hemisphere flu season typically runs from April through September. Therefore, it is important to remember that flu season is always occurring somewhere in the world. The prevalent flu virus sub-type may also vary from one hemisphere to another.

## **RECOGNIZING INFLUENZA**

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that healthy adults are able to infect other people with the flu one day before they experience symptoms and five to seven days after getting sick. It is important to recognize the signs of flu and avoid contact with other people to help prevent the spread of this communicable disease.

The most common signs of seasonal influenza, according to the CDC, are:

- Body aches and fatigue
- Coughing
- Diarrhea (more common in children than adults)
- Fever or chills
- Headaches
- Runny or stuffy nose

## **PREVENTING INFLUENZA**

Many other respiratory illnesses have similar signs and symptoms to the flu, which means it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish between a common cold and influenza. To help prevent influenza, pass on the following advice to your crew and ground personnel:

- Obtain a flu vaccine.
- Avoid close contact with other people who appear to be ill.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing with your elbow or upper arm.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap/water/friction and use a towel to dry your hands. Use a hand gel in between hand washings to clean your hands or if you can't immediately wash them.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Flu viruses are most often spread by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the eyes/nose/mouth.
- Stay in good health by eating a healthy diet, managing stress, exercising, getting plenty of sleep.

## IMMUNIZING AGAINST INFLUENZA

The most efficient way to prevent the flu is to be vaccinated against it. As passengers frequently connect domestically after their international flights, the flu vaccination is recommended for all crewmembers and not just to those that travel internationally. By immunizing themselves crewmembers are also helping in not spreading the flu to their inner family circle. **Since the circulating virus could be different between the northern and southern hemispheres, it might be worthwhile to vaccinate international crewmembers twice a year accordingly.**

Vaccination needs to be repeated annually, as flu viruses change rapidly. One year's vaccine is not effective against the viruses that will circulate widely the next year. Flu vaccines usually contain three or four strains of influenza virus that are expected to be most prevalent in the upcoming flu season.

The vaccine effectiveness in preventing influenza among healthy adults varies significantly as the causal viruses also vary. For this year season the following recommendations were posted by the CDC:

- The recommendation to not use the nasal spray flu vaccine (LAIV) was renewed for the 2017-2018 season. Only injectable flu shots are recommended for use again this season.
- Flu vaccines have been updated to better match circulating viruses (the influenza A (H1N1) component was updated).
- Pregnant women may receive any licensed, recommended, and age-appropriate flu vaccine.
- A quadrivalent recombinant flu vaccine ("Flublok Quadrivalent" RIV) is newly available this season. (Last season, only trivalent recombinant flu vaccine was available.)
- A quadrivalent inactivated flu vaccine, "Afluria Quadrivalent" IIV, was licensed last season after the annual recommendations were published.
- The age recommendation for "Fluaval Quadrivalent" has been changed from 3 years old and older to 6 months and older to be consistent with FDA-approved labeling.
- The trivalent formulation of Afluria is recommended for people 5 years and older (from 9 years and older) in order to match the Food and Drug Administration package insert.

## STOPPING THE SPREAD OF INFLUENZA

To help prevent the spread of influenza, advise your crew to take the following steps:

- Practice self-isolation until they are symptom-free for 24 hours.
- Put on surgical masks when coming into contact with any ill persons and have ill person wear protective items as well.
- Minimize the number of crew directly exposed to an ill person onboard if possible; ideally one caregiver should be designated.
- Wear gloves and an N95 mask when interacting with any ill person.
- Wash hands with warm soapy water before and after caring for any ill person (hand sanitizer is an acceptable alternative).
- Dispose of tissues, gloves, masks, etc. as biohazard waste.

Don't let influenza slow down your operation this season. Prevention is the key to healthy crew, so paying close attention to personal hygiene, frequent hand washing and vaccinations may be the only steps necessary to stop influenza.

*By: Dr Paulo Alves, Global Medical Director, Aviation Health, Global Services and Patricia M. Campbell RN, MSN, CCRN, ANP, CS at MedAire.*