

Flu Safety for Responders

Every year in the United States 12,000-56,000 people die of influenza and related complications. When treating an individual with symptoms of influenza, the Indiana Department of Homeland Security's Emergency Medical Services Section is encouraging response personnel to remember the following best practices:

Limit contact between infected and non-infected persons. When possible, isolate infected individuals. A separation of greater than six feet between infected and non-infected persons is ideal. Reduce contact between nonessential personnel and other persons and patients. Use vehicles that have separate driver and patient compartments that can provide separate ventilation to each area if possible and close the door or window between these compartments before bringing the patient on board. Set the vehicle's ventilation system to the non-recirculating mode to maximize the amount of outside air brought into the vehicle.

Wear appropriate personal protective equipment. Responders coming into contact with infected individuals should wear the following:

- Surgical or procedure mask
- Patient examination gloves
- Disposable isolation gown, especially when expecting clothes or uniform to become soiled
- Eye protection (goggles or face shield), when sprays or splatter of infectious material is likely
- Respiratory protection (NIOSH-certified N-95 or higher level respirator), when necessary

Promote cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene. Ensure patients cover both the mouth and nose with elbows or upper sleeve when sneezing or coughing. Immediately dispose of used tissues. Promote hand hygiene, including soap and water or approved alcohol-based products, as it is one of the most important practices to reduce transmission of infectious agents. Ensure resources are readily available to facilitate hand hygiene.

When possible, take precautions to limit the spread of infection from patients. Encourage the use of masks by infected individuals when in common areas and during transport. Instruct symptomatic individuals to use proper respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.

Exercise caution and practice good hygiene habits. Responders should be vigilant to avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth with contaminated hands (gloved or ungloved). Careful placement and removal of personal protective equipment will help prevent self-contamination. Immediately dispose of used gloves, gowns and masks. Do not leave masks dangling around the neck and change them when they become moist. Remember to practice hand hygiene between each patient and after removal of personal protective equipment or contact with respiratory secretions.

Clean and disinfect personal protective equipment and environmental surfaces. To prevent the spread of infection, follow standard operating procedures for routine cleaning of the emergency vehicle, reusable patient care equipment and personal protective equipment.

Strongly consider getting vaccinated. While the optimal time for flu vaccinations is October, take additional health precautions by getting an annual flu shot if influenza is circulating.

When in doubt, stay home. Individuals infected with the flu or experiencing flu-like symptoms are strongly encouraged to stay home to prevent the spread of infection.