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Hand to Mouth Greatest Virus Transmission Risk

According to studies completed at the University of Arizona, Tucson, 80% of flu infections are spread by hand contact, not sneezing and coughing. Studies have shown that children and many adults put their hands in their mouths every few minutes, allowing viruses and other germs to enter the body. So while covering sneezes and coughs is important, hand washing, surface cleaning, limiting unnecessary touching, and keeping fingers out of mouth, nose and eyes are key steps to preventing the spread of H1N1 and other flu viruses.

County Medical Director Dr. Peter Hasler explained, "Keeping our hands out of our mouth, nose and eyes is an important flu prevention step, as we almost always have germs on our fingers, and mucous membranes such as inside the mouth, nose and eyes, are gateways for germs to enter the body." Because many people forget to keep their hands out of these areas, vigorous hand washing with soap and water or a hand sanitizer for at least 20 seconds throughout the day is strongly recommended by the health department. Washing hands after sneezing or coughing, and before eating, is especially important.

Avoiding unnecessary touching of objects and surfaces touched by others can also help prevent the spread of germs. While touching such things as door knobs, faucets, counter tops, and hand railings, may be unavoidable, touching and sharing of other items such as cups, utensils, work and school supplies, computers, and phones may be easier to limit. Even well-intentioned handshaking can spread the flu, and might best be replaced with a friendly wave, nod or smile.

Frequent cleaning of shared objects and surfaces with common cleansers can help reduce the spread of flu germs. Kitchen and bathroom faucets, refrigerator, microwave and cabinet handles, light switches, TV remotes, phones, door knobs, and water fountains, are among the most commonly touched surfaces that can spread germs. These surfaces should be wiped down with a cleanser and allowed to dry completely every few hours depending on use. Cleaning supplies such as sponges, cloths and towels can also harbor and transmit germs, so these items should be changed and washed frequently.

For more information call the Department of Public Health at 1-888-722-6358.

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