

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

March 21, 2016

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BHSJ CHA Reports Uptick in Viral Infections!

Coldwater, MI. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency is reporting an uptick in flu-like illness and other viruses. During the month of February, the tri-county health department has seen an increase in respiratory illnesses and gastro-intestinal illnesses, as well as other communicable diseases. According to Kim Wilhelm, Prevention Services Director, "It's typical for flu to peak in February and March when people spend more time indoors with the windows sealed. This means they are more likely to breathe the same air as someone who has the flu and more likely to contract the virus." The Centers for Disease Control also suggests that because days are shorter during the winter, there are fewer hours of sunlight which can lead to low levels of vitamin D and melatonin. This lack of vitamin D and melatonin can compromise immune systems, which in turn decreases a person's ability to fight viruses.

To protect yourself and family, the health department recommends using good personal hygiene practices, such as:

- Covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze; put the used tissue in a wastebasket and clean your hands.
- Covering your mouth and nose with your upper sleeve (not your hands) if you do not have a tissue and need to cough or sneeze.
- Cleaning your hands as soon as possible after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose.
- Using soap and water and wash your hands for 15 - 20 seconds, preferably; or
- Using alcohol-based hand wipes or alcohol-based (60-95% alcohol) gel hand sanitizers; rub these on the hands until the liquid or gel dries.

- Cleaning your hands often when you or others are sick, especially if you touch your mouth, nose, and eyes.
- Always washing your hands before eating.
- Carrying alcohol-based hand wipes or alcohol-based (60-95% alcohol) hand-sanitizing gels with you to clean your hands when you are out in public.
- Teaching your children to use these hygiene practices, because germs are often spread at school.

When it comes to the home, individuals should always disinfect their hard surfaces such as kitchen countertops, tabletops, desktops and bathroom surfaces, as well as items that are shared by people within a home, such as remote controls, telephones, computer keyboards, etc. There are many different types of disinfectants on the market, but the old stand-by – a solution that contains chlorine bleach - is still very effective and affordable. The solution is simple to make and contains 1 tablespoon of bleach to a quart (4 cups) of water; use a clean cloth to apply this to surfaces and let stand for 3 – 5 minutes before rinsing with clean water. (For a larger supply of disinfectant, add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of bleach to a gallon [16 cups] of water.)

Laundry is another area that requires some special attention. The health department suggests:

- Gently gather soiled clothing, bedding, and linens without creating a lot of motion or fluffing; for example, do not shake sheets when removing them from the bed.
- Clean your hands after handling soiled laundry items.
- Use washing machine cycles, detergents, and laundry additives (like softener) as you normally do; follow label instructions for detergents and additives.
- Dry the cleaned laundry items as you normally do, selecting the dryer temperature for the types of fabrics in the load. Line- or air-drying can be used to dry items when machine drying is not indicated.
- Clean your hands before removing clean laundry from the washer or dryer, especially if you have coughed or sneezed on your hands.

By following these personal hygiene and cleaning recommendations, you can reduce the spread of flu and other viruses from family member to family member. Kim also adds, “Getting your annual flu shot is a very effective step you can take to avoid

getting the flu virus. Our shots protect against four strains of flu and provide protection for up to a year. Even now, it's not too late to vaccinate!"

For more information about viral infections and our immunization programs, please visit our website at www.bhsj.org.

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St. Joseph County
1110 Hill St.
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