PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF INFLUENZA

With the current rise of influenza cases on campus, all of us need to remember the basics that help boost our immunity and put into practice on a daily basis the simple common-sense things that help prevent and contain the spread of upper respiratory illnesses. The flu (as well as other respiratory and gastrointestinal viruses) can spread rapidly among college students because of the classroom settings and living conditions where there are large numbers of people confined to small areas.

WHAT IS INFLUENZA?

The flu is a respiratory illness caused by the influenza viruses. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, sometimes called the "stomach flu" are not the primary symptoms of influenza.

HOW DO I DIFFERENTIATE THE FLU FROM OTHER RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES?

Influenza has a rapid rather than a gradual onset with chills, fatigue, headache, muscle aches and a high fever (102-104 degrees Fahrenheit or greater). A dry cough, runny nose and sore throat are also typical. Occasionally these symptoms may be accompanied by some nausea and/or vomiting. The majority of these symptoms subside within five to six days. However, the respiratory symptoms may last for as long as two weeks before resolving completely and fatigue and depressed appetite may last even longer. The flu can be diagnosed based on the above history and confirmed with a test specific for influenza performed on a nasal swab.

Though the flu may make you uncomfortable, most people recover from it uneventfully. Antibiotics are of no use in the treatment of flu and other viral illness. The body's immune system cures most viral illnesses. Some people may experience complication including pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus infections, etc. People with underlying chronic illnesses are most at risk of complications.

HOW DOES THE FLU SPREAD?

Normal seasonal influenza and other respiratory viruses are usually spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The flu can also be spread via contact with objects such as door handles, telephones, keyboards or faucets that have been contaminated with the flu virus. A person then touches their mouth, eyes or nose and the virus starts reproducing in the mucous membranes. Once the flu (or any other viral illness) is seen it is difficult to contain an outbreak within the classroom and dormitory setting as someone with the flu can be contagious for one to two days prior to the onset of illness and for about five days after symptoms begin.

HOW CAN I AVOID THE FLU?

Get an annual flu shot. This is your best option for preventing seasonal flu. A flu shot does not guarantee that you will not get the flu as each year's vaccine is based on an estimate of which variant of the virus will be circulating. Even if it does not prevent the flu, the vaccine should at least lessen its severity. Some people may experience side effects like a mild headache or a low-
grade fever for a day or two after receiving the shot, but the vaccine cannot give you the flu as it is made from a killed virus. It does take approximately two weeks for you to develop immunity after getting the shot.

The well student can decrease his chances of contracting the flu and many other illnesses by following these guidelines:

- Keep your resistance up by eating a balanced diet and getting adequate sleep and exercise.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. Keep a distance of three feet or more from a person who is visibly ill with coughing and sneezing.
- Wash your hands frequently or use a hand sanitizer after handling potentially dirty or contaminated surfaces. Use a paper towel or your elbow to turn off the faucet after hand washing as viruses may live on surfaces for two hours or more.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.

NOW THAT I HAVE THE FLU, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

A few simple control measures can be effective in reducing the transmission of infection. The ill student should be considerate of his classmates and remember the following recommendations:

- Students who have been diagnosed with the flu are asked not to attend class, go to Vail Commons, the library or other large group settings as long as they are running a fever.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes and throw away contaminated tissues promptly. If a tissue is not available, sneeze into your shoulder or sleeve.
- Wash your hands or use a hand sanitizer frequently.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT OF THE NORMAL SEASONAL FLU?

- Stay home and get lots of rest
- Drink lots of liquids (at least two quarts or approximately one glass every two hours) -- fruit juice, soda, tea, soups, etc. This will help loosen nasal and chest secretions and help relieve your sore throat. It will also help you generally feel better and recover more easily if you stay well-hydrated.
- You may take Ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or other anti-inflammatories (with food) or acetaminophen (Tylenol) for muscle aches, headache, sore throat and fever. Teenagers should not take aspirin during a viral illness as there is a link between the use of aspirin and Reye's Syndrome (a rare but serious illness).
- You may also use other medications as needed such as throat lozenges, over-the-counter cough preparations, decongestants, etc.
- Antiviral drugs can diminish the symptoms of the flu and may shorten the course of the flu by a day, but they must be started within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms. The Student Health Center offers prescriptions to those with a positive flu test. Antibiotics are of no use in the treatment of the flu and other viral illnesses.
WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ON INFLUENZA?

- Center for Disease Control - www.cdc.gov
- World Health Organization - www.who.org
- N.C. Department of Health and Human Services - www.nepublichealth.com