

Influenza transmission in emergency shelters



Emergency shelters

Every year thousands of people are displaced from their homes by natural and human-generated disasters. Shelters are critical for survival in the initial stages of a disaster, but often require many people to share living spaces and sanitary facilities. These crowded conditions open the door for the transmission of many infections, including influenza, commonly call the “flu.”

The flu is contagious; therefore, it is important for shelter coordinators along with public health officials to understand how the virus spreads in order to protect clients and staff members of emergency shelters from becoming ill.

The best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated. In addition to encouraging staff and clients to receive the flu vaccine, the following precautions will help prevent the virus from spreading in emergency shelters.

- ◇ **Encourage hand hygiene and cough etiquette of people who are well, those who have any symptoms of flu, and those who care for someone who is sick.** Display posters in your shelter to educate clients on proper hand washing and to encourage them to cover their coughs.
- ◇ **Increase the distances between people.** When possible, place groups or families in individual rooms or in separate areas of the facility. Place cots head-to-toe and provide six feet of distance between cots.
- ◇ **Plan for possibly changing staffing needs.** People with high-risk health conditions should avoid caring for people with flu-like illness if possible and, because this could lead to decreases in the available labor pool, plan for alternative staffing resources.
- ◇ **Prepare for significant increases in the use of supplies to care for people with respiratory illness and control the spread of disease.**
- ◇ **Perform routine environmental cleaning:** Train and supervise staff members to follow proper cleaning and disinfecting procedures for bodily fluids and environmental surfaces.



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- ◇ **Implement strategies to ensure infection prevention and control during meal service.** Serve pre-packaged meals or meals dispensed by food service workers when possible. Cafeteria-style service is preferred.
- ◇ **Pay special attention to the needs of children.** Encourage parents and caregivers to monitor children for symptoms of flu-like illness and to report any suspected illness immediately to shelter medical staff or management.
- ◇ **Screen for flu-like illness at shelter registration and intake, and at the beginning of shifts for all staff.** During shelter registration and intake, provide separate waiting areas for people who self-identify as sick prior to medical screening.
- ◇ **Advise all workers to stay home if they are sick.** Volunteers and staff with flu-like symptoms should stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever.
- ◇ **Encourage staff and patients at higher risk of complications from flu and those with signs of more severe illness to contact their health care provider as soon as possible if they have flu-like symptoms.**
- ◇ **Isolate and group sick clients and their caregivers or family members.** Limit traffic between isolation areas and general population areas.

