

Daily Union Article
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Title: Avoid Sharing the Crud

There seems to be a significant increase in illness being passed around this time of year. As a kid, my folks always labeled any illness with the generic term: "the crud." Unfortunately, the folks who have "the crud" get accused of causing all the problems when, in truth, healthy people make their own contributions to the spread of germs and illness by not taking steps to ensure they aren't passing germs along.

Germs can spread through coughing, sneezing, talking in close proximity, or other close body contact. They can also be spread when people touch something with hidden germs on it and then touch their mouth, eyes, or nose. All too often, we are spreading an illness before we even know we are sick! Whether you are the one who is healthy or the one who is sick, here are some basics for reducing the risk of passing on illnesses from one person to another.

Get vaccinated. Vaccinations against such illnesses as seasonal flu are the number one defense against contracting the virus. In the U.S., we are barely past the halfway mark of "flu season" which began last October and continues through May. Contracting influenza can set your health and wellbeing back by days, if not weeks or months. Influenza can even lead to death. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), over a period of 31 seasons between 1976 and 2007, estimates of flu-associated deaths in the United States range from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000 people. During recent flu seasons, between 80% and 90% of flu related deaths have occurred in people 65 years and older. If you haven't gotten vaccinated against seasonal flu, it's not too late!

Wash your hands properly. Regular and proper handwashing practices will help prevent you from picking up germs from those who are ill. It will also reduce the potential of you passing germs you've unknowingly picked up on your hands to others. Wash often with soap and water. The combination of the scrubbing action with soap is the most effective way to remove unwanted germs. Don't make hand washing a race. You should scrub all over the back of your hand, between fingers and up on your wrists for a minimum of 15 seconds before you begin to rinse your hands. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol based hand rub. Use the wipes provided by many local grocers to clean the handles of shopping carts or to simply wipe your hand clear after picking up various products to put in your cart.

Cover your nose and mouth. It seems that we all should know the danger in spreading our illness through coughing and sneezing. What we may not realize is the germs spread from these two normal by-products of illness go a long way. Research shows that the speed of a sneeze can make it up to 100 mph and the wet spray can radiate as much as five feet. The germs from coughs and sneezes can live up to 2 hours or more on surfaces such as desktops or doorknobs.

Being in confined spaces with someone who is sick greatly increases the risk that their illness will be spread to the others in that space. Homes, classrooms, cars, or airplanes are some of the easier places to pick up an illness such as the cold or flu. Regular cleaning of all surfaces is especially important in confined spaces for reducing the spread of germs.

Stay home. If you are experiencing symptoms of illness, especially a fever, stay home if at all possible. Not only are you reducing the risk of giving the illness to co-workers, you are reducing the level of physical strain you put on your body while your immune system is trying to attack and get rid of the illness. The CDC recommends that anyone who is running a fever should stay home for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone (without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.) A body temperature of 100°F or higher constitutes a fever. Once you have recovered, clean and disinfect hard surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs in your home. Bathrooms surfaces, kitchen counters, remote controls, light switches and doorknobs are key surfaces to clean after you have recuperated.

It might be in your nature to go visit a friend when they are sick. Although this is a caring gesture, you need to do so knowing that you are putting yourself at risk of becoming ill. In general, it is better to stay away from people who are sick. If you want to take over a casserole, hand it to them at the door with the warming directions taped to the top and avoid going into their house.

Avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose. These areas of your body provide an ideal “portal” for germs both for the spreading of germs as well as the contracting of illness. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

If you want to have a “normal” life, you can’t completely protect yourself from illness. But you can take action to reduce the potential of becoming ill. These everyday steps are your first defense from catching the “crud”, as my parents used to say. They are also the same steps you can take to prevent spreading an illness that you may not realize you are carrying.

For more information on sanitizing your home after an illness, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!