

Newsletter

September 2007

Preventing The Spread of Colds and Flu

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While it goes without saying that our mothers do know best, I must address that nagging voice in my head telling me, "wash your hands, do you want to get sick?" Upon reading the Vancouver Province newspaper this past weekend, I was pleasantly amused to spot an article titled "It's official: hotels can make you sick". The article confirmed what I previously comprehended while working as the Medical Liaison for Team BC at the Canada Winter Games in Whitehorse this past February.

How many of us work in office towers where the windows are sealed, or in environmentally controlled rooms where the only air flow comes from an air duct in the ceiling? Now imagine living in this environment for a week or two, where the outside air temperature has a daily high of minus 25 degrees Celsius. Add to this that you are living in a student dorm room (hotel style) with 7 other people that was built to accommodate 2. Finally, visualize that the only window in that room is sealed shut by the build up of months of snow and the inside temperature is soaring to keep you warm.

Are we really surprised to learn that an outbreak of Norwalk disease was suspected during the Canada Games? Without a proper germ killing filter, every cough or sneeze in those buildings is continually circulated throughout the air system and sent back into the rooms. When an athlete sneezes into his/her hand and goes to wash, they touch the handle leaving germs, wash their hands, then touch the handle to shut it off, thereby picking those same germs back up. Now throw in the seven or eight other athletes sharing that bathroom and you see how fast a disease can wipe out a team or group of athletes. As each of those athletes leave the dorm, they touch elevator buttons, door handles, or pens to sign out. Now we see how other teams have become infected, let alone all the volunteers who continue this vicious cycle. The volunteers did a spectacular job of wiping down judo and gymnastics mats, but staying on top of the change rooms and washrooms where hundreds of athletes are moving in and out of every hour was just too much.

So how did the medical committee try to control this problem?

- Automatic hand sanitizer's were set up at the entrance and exit of the cafeteria, with a volunteer monitoring each person.
- Automatic hand sanitizer's were set up throughout the polyclinic, mission staff offices, athlete dorms, athlete village, and throughout each competition venue.
- On a daily basis, athletes and coaches were reminded to wash their hands thoroughly and often.
- Any participant showing signs of a cold or flu, was isolated from all other participants, and encouraged to use a washroom dedicated only to sick people.
- After initially controlling the amount of bottled water available to participants (due to difficulty in ensuring supply), every one was encouraged to drink plenty of sealed fluids, and sharing of water bottles was in most cases, eliminated.
- Develop the habit of coughing or sneezing into your elbow or Kleenex instead of your bare hand.

When you bring thousands of people together in a confined environment, you cannot control or eliminate all germs, but taking some simple precautions will certainly help. So, give mom a call and say "thanks for the advice, I can still learn a thing or two from you". Stay healthy and stay fit.

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