NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT of HEALTH

PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

CARING FOR SICK PEOPLE AT HOME

What is pandemic flu?

Pandemic flu means that a new strain of influenza has spread all over the world and is affecting a large number of people. During a pandemic, healthcare facilities will be very busy. In many cases, people sick with pandemic influenza can be cared for at home. The information provided here will help you protect yourself when caring for someone who is sick, and give you the information you need to help the sick person recover.

The following guidelines will help you care for someone who is sick:

- **Rest in bed.** Rest helps restore energy and strengthens the immune system, helping fight illness and speed recover.
- **Drink plenty of fluids.** Preventing dehydration is one of the most important things you can do to treat influenza. To prevent dehydration you can buy electrolyte drinks (sports drinks) at the pharmacy or grocery store or make your own.
- **Control fever.** Stock a generous supply of medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Keeping a fever low helps a loved one feel better and reduces the risk of dehydration. Do not give aspirin to anyone younger than 20.
- **Keep a record of vital signs.** A record of temperature, blood pressure and pulse, along with general observations regarding breathing difficulties, bathroom trips and fluid intake, can be helpful as you care for a loved one.

► **Caregivers should wash hands thoroughly after providing care!**

Refer to the following pages for more detailed information regarding:

Keeping yourself and other family members from getting sick …….page 2

Keeping a sick person clean and preventing bed sores……...page 3

Preventing dehydration…….……...page 4

Managing fever……page 5

Providing essential medications……..page 6

When to ask for help……page 7

KEEPING YOURSELF AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS FROM GETTING SICK

Although caring for a person with influenza may increase your risk of getting sick, there are things you and your family can do to reduce that risk.

- **Avoid direct contact.** Avoid being near the sick person's face as much as you can.

- **Wear a mask.** If you are within three feet of the person, and N95 mask is recommended. If this type of mask is not available, a surgical mask or even a homemade mask is recommended. Instructions for creation of a homemade mask from heavy duty T-shirt material can be found on the following webpage: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol12no06/05-1468-G.htm . Any sort of cloth over the face may provide some protection.

- **Keep others away from the sick person.** Minimize the number of people who have contact with the sick person. Only those providing care should be in close contact.

- **Wash hands thoroughly and often!** Wash your hand thoroughly after providing care. If available, wear protective gloves when providing care. Even if you use gloves, wash your hands after providing care.

- **Avoid touching your eyes and mouth.** Don't touch your eyes or mouth without washing your hands first.

- **Wear protective clothing.** Wear a dressing gown (robe) or other removable clothing when caring to the sick person. Remove the outer clothing before leaving the room.

- **Keep sick family members separated from family members who are not sick.** If more than one person in the household is sick with pandemic influenza, it will be easiest to provide care for them in the same room.

KEEPING A SICK PERSON CLEAN AND PREVENTING BED SORES

If a person becomes wet or soiled because they cannot make it to the bathroom, their sheets and blankets will need to be changed and their skin cleaned and dried. For a sick adult, this is easier for two caregivers, but one person can do it.

1. Put on rubber, vinyl or latex gloves.

2. Roll the patient on their side and clean the patient's skin.

3. Loosen the sheets on the side of the bed, at the patient's back, and at the foot and head of the bed and roll the sheets towards them as close to them as possible.

4. Roll the patient to the other side and remove the sheets and blankets.

5. Use the same process to put new sheets under the patients.

6. Avoid trying to pull the sheet under a person because this could damage skin.

Patients who are very sick and weak are often not able to turn over in bed or re-position themselves. Patients need to be carefully turned every two hours to prevent bed sores caused from the pressure of lying in the same position for too long. Patients should be turned from side to back to side.

1. Reach across the person grasping the blankets or sheets that are under the person and pull them toward you, rolling the person on his or her side.

2. Use pillows or folded blankets to help "prop" the patient into the desired position.

3. Position the arms and legs in a way that looks comfortable to you, making sure they are not pinned under or causing bony areas to rest against other bony areas.

PREVENTING DEHYDRATION

Dehydration occurs when people lose more water than they take in. Dehydration can be a serious condition. It's very important to make sure a person sick with influenza is drinking enough liquids.

What should they drink?

Fluid loss includes both water and salts, so if a person is not Eating, giving solutions with salts and sugars is best. Juice is a good example. Pedialyte or other commercial hydration solutions can be used. If these are not available, solutions can be made with ingredients in the home.

- 1 quart of water
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 8 teaspoons of sugar
- ⅓ teaspoon of baking soda

If water is all that is available, or all that the person will accept, give them water.

How much should they drink?

Adults – Minimum of 1½ to 2 quarts per day

Kids:
10 lb. child – Minimum 1 pint per day
20 lb. child – Minimum 1 quart per day
30 lb. child – Minimum 1¼ quarts per day
40 lb. child – Minimum 1½ quarts per day

If the person has a fever, he or she will need more (up to 50% more.)

Don't be afraid to give more!

What if they need help to drink?

1. Raise the head of the bed or assist the person to sit up in bed.
2. Assist the person to sip small amounts of liquid. Offer something to drink often.
3. Monitor how much they are drinking. If they are drinking less than the amount recommended in the gray box above, you'll need to watch closely for dehydration.

→ If the patient is unconscious and cannot swallow, do NOT try giving them fluids! Call a health-care professional for help.

How do I know if they are dehydrated?

To test for dehydration, consider the following:

- Is the person drinking the recommended minimum amount of fluids?
- Look inside the person's mouth and see if it is dry.
- Look at the eyes and inside the lower lids and see if they are moist or dry.
- Feel in the armpit or in the groin area for sweat moisture.
- Gently pinch and pull up an area of loose skin (e.g., back of the hand.) When released, the skin should return to position quickly, not slowly. You can compare to your own skin.
- Is the person going to the bathroom (making urine) several times per day?

If the person seems very dry, contact their doctor or health-care professional for advice and help.

MANAGING FEVER

Fever is an expected symptom of influenza. In fact, fever is part of the body's defense mechanism against the infection and helps to kill the virus. Fever associated with influenza will normally not reach high enough to be an emergency (106º or higher). But fever will increase the loss of liquids and if the person is not taking in enough fluids, he or she can become dehydrated faster. Lowering a fever also will make a person more comfortable.

Reducing Fever

- Give plenty of fluids
- Give acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Do not give aspirin to anyone younger than 20.
- A sponge bath with lukewarm water can provide comfort. Do not use cold water, which can cause shivering and make the fever worse.

Continue to monitor. Keeping a record of the person's temperature can be helpful.

PROVIDING ESSENTIAL MEDICATIONS

People who are sick with influenza should continue to take medications that have been prescribed to them as long as they are alert. Follow these guidelines:

- If the person has a hard time swallowing pills, most pills can be crushed or capsules opened and put in a small amount of food. Check the information on the bottle. If the bottle says not to crush it, don't crush it.
- Know which medications are essential and which aren't. If a patient is alert, they can tell you. Otherwise, general knowledge of the person's medical history is helpful.

Special information for those with diabetes:

Insulin and diabetes pills can pose a special problem is the person is not eating or not eating normally. Giving the usual dose of medicine to lower blood sugar may be too much if the person isn't eating much. However, not giving any diabetes medicine may result in very high blood sugar which impairs the body's ability to fight the infection and causes the body to lose more fluids. In addition, some people with diabetes cannot make any insulin and will die if they don't receive some insulin by injection.

Home glucose monitoring (testing the blood sugar) will be very helpful. Blood sugars should optimally be kept around 150 to 200 and should be checked three or four times a day if possible. Attempting tighter control (that is, lower blood sugars) may be a problem if the person is not very alert. They won't be able to let you know if they have a reaction and they may have difficulty eating food to get their blood sugar back up. Even in the hospital, blood sugar levels can be difficult to manage, so professional help may be needed of the blood sugar level is staying too low (e.g., less than 60) or way too high (more than 300). Blood sugars less than 40 are dangerous and must be raised immediately.

If you cannot do home glucose monitoring at home and not professional help is available, it may be possible to monitor urine for sugar with strips from the pharmacy for those people with diabetes who are not on insulin. By letting the person get rid of some sugar in their urine, but not a large amount, the person may be able to stay out of trouble until they resume a diet which allows them to take their full medication dose. Using this method requires being able to catch some urine to test it, and is of little use to people on insulin whose blood sugar level may rise or fall rapidly.

WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

Because health-care resources will be limited during a pandemic, those people who can be cared for at home will need to stay at home. However, some people will simply be too sick to be cared for at home. While it is not possible to describe every circumstance, the following are some guidelines for when a person should be admitted to a hospital.

- Has not been able to drink any or very little fluids for two days.
- Seems very dehydrated. (see page 4 for more information)
- Does not respond when spoken to or touched and cannot be woken up.
- Has other serious health conditions (heart disease, transplant patients, severe high blood pressure, severe asthma) and cannot take their medication.
- Has diabetes and is not eating much, is on insulin and blood sugar cannot be monitored at home.
- Person is turning blue or having difficulties breathing.
- Very high blood pressure or very low blood pressure (if checked at home.) For example, an adult with a top number of more than 180 or a bottom number more than 110. Similarly, a top number less than 80 would be much too low for almost all people.

During a pandemic, some people with influenza will develop life threatening problems completely unrelated to influenza such as heart attacks or asthma attacks. Even though health care will be limited, those people should still be evaluated immediately in an emergency room.

If you are concerned that the event is life threatening, call 9-1-1!

You will be instructed on whether to take the patient to the hospital yourself or whether an ambulance is available to assist.