



**PEAK**  
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## **Infection Control: Respiratory Etiquette**

Peak Development Resources, LLC  
P.O. Box 13267  
Richmond, VA 23225

Phone: (804) 233-3707  
Fax: (804) 233-3705  
Email: editor@peakdev.com

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Describe how respiratory illnesses can be transmitted.
2. List principles of respiratory etiquette and how these prevent infection.
3. Discuss other measures that help to decrease the risk of infection.

Infectious respiratory illnesses are very commonly spread from person to person, especially in the winter months. These illnesses not only cause a great deal of lost work time and healthcare dollars, but may also cause severe complications, such as pneumonia, and even death.

According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), costs for influenza alone are estimated at \$4.6 billion in direct healthcare dollars annually. Workers lose 111 million work days each year, costing \$7 billion in sick time and lost productivity. These figures do not take into account the many additional lost days and costs resulting from other infections, such as colds, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and pertussis (whooping cough), which has recently increased in incidence. In many cases, these infectious illnesses can be prevented by taking proper precautions to prevent the spread of germs, promoting a safer environment for clients, families and healthcare staff.

This newsletter will discuss respiratory etiquette, the use of specific precautions to prevent disease transmission. Modes of transmission will be covered, as well as actions to reduce the spread of respiratory infections.

### **Transmission of Infection**

Most respiratory infections, such as colds and flu, are spread mainly

by droplet transmission. Large droplets of saliva and mucus containing the virus are expelled when the person coughs, sneezes, talks or laughs. When these droplets land in another person's eyes, nose or mouth, infection may occur. These droplets do not usually travel in the air more than three feet, so transmission to someone more than three feet away is unlikely.

In addition, many respiratory illnesses can also be spread by contact, by touching the person (direct contact) or items in the environment (indirect contact) that are contaminated with droplet spray. Once these germs are on a person's hands and not washed off, they can be transferred to the person's eyes, nose or mouth, or to another person, causing illness.

### **Reducing the Risk of Illness**

The risk of transmitting respiratory illnesses can be greatly reduced by use of proper respiratory etiquette principles, along with effective hand hygiene. These measures should be practiced by all persons, including healthcare providers and clients, whether or not a respiratory illness has been diagnosed. Sneezing and coughing may occur for reasons other than infection, such as allergies and asthma.



But, since many respiratory infections become contagious a day or more before any symptoms occur,

it should be assumed that any respiratory secretions could be infectious.

Respiratory etiquette involves covering the mouth and nose effectively when coughing or sneezing. This decreases the number of droplets and germs forced into the air that could land on objects or another person. The mouth and nose should be completely covered with a tissue before coughing or sneezing, if possible. If a tissue is not immediately available, the person should cough or sneeze into his/her elbow to block the droplets. The hands should not be used to cover the nose and mouth, as they will become contaminated.

After use, tissues should be immediately dropped into a receptacle that does not require opening by hands, such as an open trash can with liner or a paper bag. Used tissues should not be left in the bed or placed on surfaces, such as bedside tables, as these surfaces will become contaminated. If the healthcare provider must assist the client with disposal of tissues, the trash can may be held to allow the client to put the tissue in, or the healthcare provider may dispose of the tissue with a gloved hand. Used client tissues should not be touched with the healthcare provider's bare hand, since standard precautions must be observed to prevent contact with body fluids.

Thorough hand hygiene should be performed by the client after coughing or sneezing, and by the healthcare provider who has helped to dispose of tissues. Hands may be cleaned either by washing with soap and water, or by use of an alcohol-based hand gel. The CDC states that alcohol-based hand gels are more effective than using plain or antimicrobial soap and water in reducing the number of viruses and bacteria on hands. Hand washing is recommended when hands are visibly dirty, before eating, and after using the bathroom. Hand gel is recommended by the CDC for all other uses. Also, remember that respiratory germs can be picked up on the hands from surfaces. Always clean hands thoroughly after touching the client or his/her surroundings.



### **Transmission-Based Precautions**

When a client is diagnosed with, or suspected of having, an infectious respiratory illness, such as influenza, transmission-based precautions may be ordered. It is important to maintain effective

respiratory etiquette and observe ordered transmission-based precautions, even if you think you're not at risk for the illness. For example, do not assume that you cannot get the flu because you received a flu vaccine.



The vaccine is strongly recommended by the CDC and other major groups, and does prevent influenza in a great number of people. However, it is not 100% effective. In each year's vaccine, 3 to 4 flu strains are included, based on predictions of the most common strains that year. There are other flu strains not covered by the vaccine that could cause infection. Also, each individual's immune response to the vaccine determines how effective it is. Studies by the CDC show that, in most years, vaccine effectiveness is around 50%.

Most respiratory illnesses are spread by droplet and contact transmission. A few, such as TB, are airborne, allowing the germs to travel long distances on air currents. For droplet precautions, a mask should be worn when within 3 to 6 feet of the client. With contact precautions, a gown and gloves are used when contact with the client or items/surfaces in the environment occurs. If airborne precautions are ordered, healthcare workers entering the home must use approved respirators that have been fit-tested.

### **Protecting Yourself and Others**

As a healthcare provider, you can help to protect the health of your clients and others in the household by teaching them to use proper respiratory etiquette and to avoid contact with others having signs of infection. Client friends and family having signs of respiratory illness and/or fever should be encouraged to wait to visit the client until they are symptom-free. Or, if they live in the home, they should maintain a distance of 3 to 6 feet from the client, if possible, to avoid transmitting infection.

Healthcare providers who develop signs of respiratory infection, including fever, should stay home from work until the fever has been gone for 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing medication. If coughing or sneezing continues after, a mask should be worn during client care.

By following appropriate respiratory etiquette and infection control guidelines, you can help to keep clients, family members, co-workers and yourself free from respiratory infection.



## Infection Control: Respiratory Etiquette

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_ 1. Infectious respiratory illnesses may cause:
  - A. high healthcare costs
  - B. severe complications and death
  - C. lost work time and productivity
  - D. all of the above
  
- \_\_\_\_ 2. Respiratory etiquette should be practiced by all clients, family members, visitors and healthcare providers.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
- \_\_\_\_ 3. Most respiratory infections are spread mainly by:
  - A. airborne
  - B. direct contact
  - C. indirect contact
  - D. droplet
  
- \_\_\_\_ 4. Principles of respiratory etiquette include all of the following EXCEPT:
  - A. cover the nose and mouth with a tissue when sneezing or coughing
  - B. clean hands after coughing or sneezing
  - C. sneeze or cough into the hands if no tissue is available
  - D. discard used tissues immediately into an open receptacle
  
- \_\_\_\_ 5. According to the CDC, which of the following is most effective in reducing germs on the hands?
  - A. antimicrobial soap and water
  - B. plain soap and water
  - C. alcohol-based hand gel
  - D. all of the above are equally effective

- \_\_\_6. The type of transmission-based precautions needed by a client depends on:
- A. the age of the client
  - B. how long the client has had symptoms of disease
  - C. the physical condition of the client
  - D. how the disease is spread to others
- \_\_\_7. When proper respiratory etiquette is used, hand washing is not necessary for the client or healthcare provider.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_8. Droplet transmission of a respiratory infection is much less likely to occur if the non-infected person does which of the following:
- A. avoids touching items in the infected person's environment
  - B. washes hands thoroughly after being near or touching the infected person
  - C. maintains a distance of 3 to 6 feet from the infected person
  - D. keeps windows open to allow a constant flow of fresh air
- \_\_\_9. A healthcare provider who has had the flu vaccine has no risk of getting the flu from a client having the illness.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_10. When working with a client on both droplet and contact precautions, the healthcare provider should use which of the following personal protective equipment?
- A. mask, gloves and gown
  - B. respirator, goggles and gown
  - C. goggles and gloves
  - D. mask only

