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Illness: the gift no one wants to receive

Ithaca, Stanton, St. Johns- The season of gift giving and gift receiving is well underway. While most people enjoy receiving a thoughtful gift, no one wishes to be gifted an illness, especially around the holidays.

Two illnesses are especially bothersome this time of year: norovirus and influenza. Most people are familiar with these terms, but many aren't sure what the difference is. Knowing what causes these illnesses, what can be done to prevent them, and what symptoms to watch out for, can help ensure you stay illness free.

Norovirus (what some people refer to as the "stomach flu"), is extremely contagious. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain, headache, body pain, and fever. It usually starts within 12 to 48 hours of exposure and lasts one to three days. The virus is found both in the stool and vomit of the ill person. Norovirus is very hardy and able to survive outside the human body and capable of infecting others for up to several weeks.

Influenza (commonly called "the flu") is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and in severe cases, even death. Influenza typically starts suddenly, one to four days after being exposed. Symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, severe body aches, tiredness, headache and chills. Many people think that diarrhea and vomiting is a symptom of influenza, but this is rarely the case. Influenza is spread when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person land in the mouth or nose of those nearby. The virus can also spread when someone touches droplets that have landed on an object and then touches their own mouth or nose before washing their hands. The flu virus can survive outside the body up to 24 hours. People who are infected are contagious for a day before they start to feel sick. For these reasons, prevention is key.

Handwashing is one of the best ways to prevent both norovirus and influenza. People should wash their hands often, especially after using the restroom, changing diapers, before eating, and after blowing their nose or coughing into their hands.

Covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing will go a long way to prevent illness. If a tissue isn't available, cough and sneeze into the bend of your elbow.

Vaccination is the best way to protect oneself from getting influenza. It can also reduce the severity of

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symptoms if you do get sick. A yearly flu vaccine is recommended for everyone over the age of 6 months. Children who get severely ill or die from the flu typically have no underlying health problems, but are unfortunately not vaccinated. It takes up to two weeks after the vaccine is given before the body builds up enough immunity to prevent the flu, so residents are advised to get vaccinated right away before flu activity increases. It's important to note that the vaccine will not give you influenza because it is made with inactivated, or killed virus. Those wishing to get the flu vaccine can do so at their doctor's office, most pharmacies or at the Mid-Michigan District Health Department by calling 989-224-2195 in Clinton County, 989-875-3681 in Gratiot County, or 989-831-5237 in Montcalm County.

To prevent further spread of illness, it is important for adults to stay home from work when they are ill and to keep sick kids home from school and daycare. Those with influenza or flu-like symptoms should stay home until at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever or signs of a fever without the use of fever-reducing medicine. Individuals infected with a norovirus-type illness should not return to school or work until free of symptoms such as diarrhea for at least two days (48 hours).

*Mid-Michigan District Health Department serves the residents of Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm Counties.
We take action to protect, maintain and improve the health of our community.
Advancing innovative solutions to achieve healthier outcomes*

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