

The following article was written by Ann Busche, Director of Public Health and Human Services for St. Louis County. It was originally published in the Duluth Budgeteer in September 2012.

'Tis the Season ...

Yes, the holiday season is upon us, and in this mobile society, family and friends travel by plane and car to gather and celebrate. The doorbell rings and we rush to welcome our visitors, urging them to come in out of the cold. There's a lot of hand shaking, and hugging, and kissing, and at the risk of being called Scrooge, there's also lots of germ sharing. After all, it's not just the holiday season; it is also the flu season.

The flu season has arrived a bit early this year and health officials are already seeing an increase in influenza (flu for short) activity. Flu activity is monitored and categorized as sporadic, local, regional, or widespread. There are already 18 states with wide spread flu activity and Minnesota is rated as having regional flu activity. Have friends or relatives coming from other states? You can check out the level of flu activity on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/flu

Need a quick reminder of flu and flu like symptoms? Symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people may also have vomiting and diarrhea. People may be infected with the flu, and have respiratory symptoms without a fever.

The good news for this flu season is that this year's vaccine is a great match for the variations of flu that are making people sick, so when you got your flu shot, your immune system began to protect you from exactly the germs that Grandma Gertrude may bring with her when she arrives from Iowa (which has widespread flu activity).

Of course, we're still going to welcome Grandma Gertrude with open arms, but there are some easy things to do to stop the spread of germs:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- If you are sick with flu-like illness, you should stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.) Tougher to do during this holiday season, so if you are not feeling well, respectfully decline a handshake or hug and explain why; most will understand and appreciate your thoughtfulness.
- If you are coughing or sneezing, don't use your hands to cover your cough or catch the spray of the sneeze. If you do, those germs then get transferred to objects you touch through handshakes, setting the table with silverware, passing the mashed potatoes—I think you get the picture. Instead, sneeze into your sleeve! Cover your cough or sneeze by bringing your arm across your face and use the bend of the elbow to absorb the spray. It does help if you have a long sleeved shirt on; that area gets very little contact with other objects, so the risk of spreading germs is minimized.

Let's all take these steps to make this flu season (and holiday season) as healthy as possible. Happy Holidays from all of us in Public Health and Human Services!