

Infectious and Communicable Diseases

March 2008

Over the course of this winter we have seen several outbreaks of illnesses that have spread through the community and have even forced the closure of hospital and long-term care facilities to visitors. During December, to stop the spread of gastro-enteritis through the hospital, the administration was obliged to close the doors to all visitors. Despite warning signs and requests at the entrance, visitors were arriving with signs of illness and not all were disinfecting their hands on arrival. Therefore, security guards were put in place and circulation was strictly supervised to ensure that people coming in from outside went only to those departments open to them and that everyone disinfected their hands upon arrival and departure. As I write now, the long-term care facility the Centre d'hébergement de Mont Tremblant, is fighting an influenza outbreak and restricting visits.

One reason to close these facilities to visitors is because the residents or patients are generally in a weakened state and are therefore more vulnerable to infectious and communicable diseases. The best treatment is prevention, by far. We owe it to our communities to do our utmost to prevent the spread of disease and it is our responsibility to take the steps necessary to do so.

Among these steps is the annual flu vaccine. Not only does it protect the people who receive it from getting the flu, but because that person does not get sick, it has the effect of protecting his or her family and friends from exposure. It is equally important to be vigilant and not spread germs. If you feel sick, don't go out. Keep washing your hands. Cough into your sleeve rather than your hand. Keep tissues handy if you are sneezing.

When our children were young and wanted to go outside inappropriately dressed for the weather, our admonitions to put on a hat or scarf were ignored if accompanied by "You'll catch a cold!" or similar warnings. However, when we reframed the risk as "If you bring something into the house, we will all get sick," there was much more willingness to be responsible. After all, what child would like to see his or her mother in bed with a cold? While the young see themselves as invulnerable, children are very willing to take responsibility for those around them.

As a society we have developed some habits that should be changed in the interest of keeping us healthier. We all know that we should not smoke and we should eat well, exercise often and keep our minds active. But there are some habits we take for granted that should perhaps be rethought.

The number of germs transmitted through the simple social custom of shaking hands is astounding. Our hands pick things up everywhere and pass on whatever is clinging to them, oftentimes providing an ideal environment for germs to flourish. That's why hand hygiene is important. Maybe we'd all be better off if we kissed cheeks when we meet (except when we have a cold), or gripped arms rather than hands, or, even better, bowed slightly to each other clasping our own hands in front of us. It is amusing to imagine businessmen greeting each other with a two-cheek kiss or a bow.

Sheila Eskenazi, President, English Communities Committee of the CSSS des Sommets