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Shortage of Flu Vaccine Puts Emphasis on Good Health Habits, Says /WU Director

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Shortage of Flu Vaccine Puts Emphasis on Good Health Habits, Says IWU Director

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The flu vaccine shortage makes basic prevention methods especially critical on college campuses where outbreaks can become difficult to contain, says Dolores Helm, director of health services at Illinois Wesleyan University.

The University was forced to cancel its normal vaccination clinics because of the vaccine shortage. According to Helm, the minimal supply is being offered through next week to high-risk students (such as nursing students and students with asthma or other chronic health problems), then to similarly high-risk employees. If any vaccine remains after Oct. 29, it will be returned to the Illinois Department of Public Health.

In the meantime, Helm has ramped up a campus-wide educational campaign in efforts to keep the community healthy. Packets with hand-washing cloths have been distributed at campus eateries and residence halls, and Helm is working to have mild lotion-soaps replaced with an antibacterial variety in dispensers across campus. Posters are already prominently on display throughout the campus, promoting the Center for Disease Control's prevention mantras: avoid close contact with those who are sick; stay home when you are sick; cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing; avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth; and wash your hands often.

It sounds simple, but Helm notes that few people wash their hands properly – for 15-20 seconds, getting between the fingers where germs from a sneeze are sure to hit. She adds it's difficult to get a campus of conscientious students to accept a 5-10 day recovery time for a full-blown flu, when it would be better for them to stay away from classes while contagious.

“The main reason I worry about our student population is that our kids are under a lot of stress; they push themselves to the hilt,” she says. She wants to encourage health habits that should be followed year-round – the proverbial things you “learned in kindergarten” that people often shrug off.

“Get lots of sleep, manage stress, drink lots of water, eat your usual good diet – just do everything you can personally to keep your health at an optimum. The best way to keep everybody well is to individually (do what you can),” Helm says.

Although people call a variety of symptoms the flu, she stresses that influenza is a potentially serious upper respiratory disease.

“(People) die of this – generally those whose immune symptoms are compromised. The healthier you are, the better enabled your system is to fight this off.”

To discuss flu prevention issues on a college campus with Helm, contact either Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at (309)556-3181.