Colds and Flu (Influenza)

WHAT ARE THEY? Colds and influenza are respiratory illnesses – infections of the head and chest – that are caused by viruses. Colds can cause a stuffy nose, runny nose (with clear or greenish mucus), headache, sneezing, watery eyes, sore throat and cough. The flu can also include fever, achiness and fatigue. People with colds are usually mildly ill for a week. People with the flu are often a little sicker for a little longer.

HOW ARE THEY SPREAD? Colds and flu are spread by contact with mucus from the nose or saliva. They can be spread by coughing and sneezing, kissing on the lips, and sharing food, eating utensils, and mouthed toys. They are also spread by touching hands to nose and mouth, reusing tissues, and not washing hands after blowing the nose. They spread most easily in crowded, poorly ventilated and overheated rooms.

WHEN ARE THEY CONTAGIOUS? Colds and flu start being contagious 1 or 2 days before the symptoms start and in the first 1 or 2 days of the illness. They become less contagious over the course of illness. After exposure to colds and flu, it usually takes several days to become ill.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED? Colds and flu are diagnosed by the common symptoms. Generally no medication is needed to treat colds and flu. The best treatment is to help the body’s own defenses fight the virus by a few simple measures: adequate rest, nutrition, and plenty of liquids to drink. Home remedies such as chicken soup and teas (without caffeine) are fine. A vaporizer can help relieve congestion. In general, medications such as antihistamines, decongestants, and antibiotics do not help children’s colds and flu and can occasionally be dangerous. You don’t need to bundle children up or keep them indoors – just dress them appropriately for the weather and their own comfort. Children who are uncomfortable with fever may be given acetaminophen. Never give aspirin; it can cause a fatal condition called Reye’s Syndrome.

SHOULD THE CHILD STAY HOME? A child with a cold or flu does not need to stay home as long as he/she is feeling well enough to participate in the program’s activities.

HOW CAN WE LIMIT THE SPREAD?
- Caregiver should consider getting a yearly influenza vaccine to protect them against a common cause of the flu. This is highly recommended for the elderly and people with immune problems or chronic illnesses such as asthma and heart disease.
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow and away from people. If you cough or sneeze into your hand or a tissue, wash your hands afterward.
- Wipe runny noses with a clean tissue, throw the tissue away, then wash your hands.
- Don’t share food, pacifiers, bottles or toothbrushes. Wash eating utensils and drinking cups well between uses.
- Clean and disinfect mouthed toys and dining tables after each use. Clean and disinfect water fountains, telephone receivers and other frequently handled items daily.
- Discourage nose picking. Try to limit touching the eyes, nose and mouth. Don’t kiss children on the mouth – hug them and kiss them on the forehead instead.
- Maximize outdoor play and indoor ventilation.