Don’t Let Your Flu Out Of The House

Safety Talk

Attitudes have changed about airborne infections such as colds and flu. The workplace culture now values “respiratory etiquette” more than unswerving determination to never taking a sick day.

Etiquette means showing consideration for others. When applied to illness, it means not bringing your germs to work.

The old work ethic of admiring employees who “toughed it out” in spite of looking like death warmed-over, frequently gets a cold reception today.

In this age of fears of catching SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) and other diseases, few people appreciate a coughing, sneezing co-worker. Employers also realize that productivity suffers when others catch your cold or flu and have to phone in sick. The common cold and flu are among the leading causes of workplace absenteeism.

The difference between the flu and the common cold boils down to the severity of the symptoms. With either, you will probably feel lousy and run-down, but the flu brings extra misery, including a high fever, head and muscle aches, extreme fatigue and sometimes stomach symptoms. With a cold or the flu, you are infectious from one day before symptoms start until three to seven days after they hit.

If someone else is spraying the workplace with cold germs, you can protect yourself from infection by:

- staying as far away as possible from a person who has symptoms,
- washing your hands frequently with warm water and soap, especially before putting anything into your mouth and

- avoiding touching your eyes, nose, ears and mouth – all common entry routes for viruses.

There are two other respiratory diseases that can be caught by breathing germs. The first, tuberculosis, is a serious disease that attacks the lungs. There are about 16,000 TB cases a year in the United States.

Symptoms may include chills, fever, weakness, weight loss, chest pain, a persistent bad cough and the expulsion of blood or sticky mucus from the lungs.

SARS symptoms include a fever of 100.5 degrees F (38 degrees C), coughing and shortness of breath. X-rays of the lungs show the conditions that create breathing difficulties. Between 15 and 50 percent of SARS patients die. Symptoms appear within 10 days of close contact with another SARS patient.

Always try to stay home while you have a raging cold or the flu. If you absolutely must go to work, stay as far away from your co-workers as you can.