

Weekly Wellness Tip

H1N1 (Swine) Flu: Surgical Masks

You may have seen images recently of people wearing surgical masks as a method to protect themselves from acquiring the H1N1 (swine) flu. But are these masks really effective?

According to OSHA, surgical masks are not designed or certified to prevent the inhalation of small airborne contaminants. These particles are not visible to the naked eye but may still be capable of causing infection. Surgical masks are not designed to seal tightly against the user's face. During inhalation, much of the potentially contaminated air can pass through gaps between the face and the surgical masks and not be pulled through the filter material of the mask. Their ability to filter small particles varies significantly based upon the type of material used to make the surgical mask, so they cannot be relied upon to protect workers against airborne infectious agents.

Surgical masks are intended to be used as a physical barrier to protect the user from hazards, such as splashes of large droplets of blood or body fluids. Surgical masks also protect other people against infection from the person wearing the surgical mask. Such masks trap large particles of body fluids that may contain bacteria or viruses expelled by the wearer. Surgical masks are used for several different purposes, including the following:

- Placed on sick people to limit the spread of infectious respiratory secretions to others.
- Worn by healthcare providers to prevent accidental contamination of patients' wounds by the organisms normally present in mucus and saliva.
- Worn by workers to protect themselves from splashes or sprays of blood or bodily fluids; they may also keep contaminated fingers/hands away from the mouth and nose.

The best way to protect yourself from H1N1 (swine) flu is by following these simple preventive measures:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective, if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw away the tissue in the trash after you use it.

Source: OSHA

H1N1 (Swine) Flu Portal

Go to teamhealth.com/wellness/fluinformation for more information about H1N1 (swine) flu and resources that are available to you.