Staying Healthy this Winter

With the holidays upon us, it is easy to put aside our health as we focus on celebrating the season with family and friends. But the holidays fall in the middle of the annual flu season; close quarters, stress and lack of sleep during this time of year can make us more vulnerable to illness increasing the need to avoid the spread of germs.

One of the most important steps a person can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others is keeping their hands clean. Adults and children should wash their hands often, especially after coughing or sneezing.

Hand washing is simple! Just follow these steps:

- Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds. This is about the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice through.
- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a paper towel or air dryer. Sharing cloth towels can spread germs.
- If possible, use a paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the door.

In addition to hand washing, there are several other good health habits to practice now and throughout the rest of the winter season that can help your body stay healthy and fight off the flu and other illness. Public health professionals in Michigan recommend the following:

- Eat a balanced diet including plenty of vegetables, fruits and whole grain products.
- Drink plenty of water and go easy on salt, sugar, alcohol and saturated fat.
- Exercise regularly. Thirty or more minutes of physical activity most days of the week can help boost your immunity.
- Get plenty of rest. Sleep is shown to help your body fight off illness.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread this way.
- Stay away from people who are sick as much as you can.

If you get sick, stay home from work or school.

At this busy time of year, sickness and disease are probably the last things anyone wants to worry about, which is why we should do all we can to prevent them.
**JANUARY IS RADON ACTION MONTH**

**RADON – A SILENT KILLER**

The Health Department is working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in a nationwide campaign to educate Americans about the dangers of radon exposure and to encourage them to take action to protect their homes and families.

During the year 2012, 80 radon tests were conducted in Dickinson and Iron Counties. Of these 80 homes that were tested, 31% were found to be elevated. Radon is a naturally occurring, invisible, odorless, tasteless gas that is dispersed in outdoor air, but can reach harmful levels when trapped in buildings. Scientists have long been concerned about the health risk of radon and now have overwhelming proof that exposure to elevated levels of radon causes lung cancer in humans.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that radon is responsible for more than 20,000 lung cancer deaths per year. Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S. after smoking and the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers. However, because you can’t see or smell radon, people tend to downplay its health effects and ignore the possibility that there might be a silent killer in their homes.

Testing homes for elevated levels of radon is simple and inexpensive. Radon test kits can be purchased at local hardware and home improvement stores or directly from the Health Department. Many are priced under $25.00. During the month of January, the Health Department is selling short-term test kits for $5 and long-term kits for $10; which normally sell for $9 and $22 respectively. Radon problems can be fixed by qualified contractors for a cost similar to that of many common home repairs such as painting or having a new water heater installed.

The Dickinson-Iron District Health Department urges area residents to take action during this year’s National Radon Action Month by testing their homes for radon. Radon poses a serious threat to our community’s health but there is a straightforward solution. For more information on radon, radon testing and mitigation, and radon-resistant new construction, call the Health Department at 779-7239 or 265-9913 or visit EPA’s National Radon Action Month Website at [www.epa.gov/radon/nram](http://www.epa.gov/radon/nram).

**National Birth Defects Prevention Month Seeks to Raise Awareness of Birth Defects**

The Health Department is supporting the National Birth Defects Prevention Network (NBDPN) to increase awareness of birth defects, the leading cause of infant mortality in the United States. In fact, every 4 ½ minutes, a baby is born with a birth defect. In honor of January as Birth Defects Prevention Month, the Health Department is actively focusing on raising awareness among healthcare professionals and the general public about the frequency with which birth defects occur in the United States and the steps that can be taken to prevent them. The risk for many types of birth defects can be reduced through healthy lifestyle choices and medical interventions before and during pregnancy.

There are many different kinds of birth defects including congenital heart defects, cleft lip or palate, defects of the brain and spine, and a variety of genetic syndromes such as Down syndrome. Some have only a minor and brief effect on a baby’s health and some have life-threatening and/or life-long effects.

More than 120,000 babies born with a birth defect (approximately 1 in 33 live births) are reported each year in the United States. Birth defects are the most common cause of death in infants and the second most common cause of death in children aged one to four years.

The health of both parents prior to pregnancy can affect the risk of having a child with a birth defect. Diet, life-style choices, factors in the environment, health conditions, and medications taken before and during pregnancy all play a role in determining the risk of birth defects.

Studies have demonstrated several important steps women can take to help prevent birth defects. Women who are pregnant or may become pregnant are advised to:

- Take 400mcg of folic acid daily from the beginning of menstruation through menopause.
- Eat a healthy diet and aim for a healthy weight.
- Keep diabetes under control.
- Get a medical checkup before pregnancy and address specific health issues including weight control, control of diabetes, and any medications taken.
- Stop smoking and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Stop drinking alcohol prior to pregnancy or as soon into pregnancy as possible.
- Do not take illegal drugs.
- Plan carefully. Use contraception if taking medications that increase the risk for birth defects.
- Know your family medical history and potential genetic risks.

To learn more about our programs here at the Health Department please call 774-1868 or 265-9913. Further information about NBDPN can be found at [www.NBDPN.org](http://www.NBDPN.org) or March of Dimes website at [www.marchofdimes.com](http://www.marchofdimes.com).
February is National Children’s Dental Health Month

Sipping, Snacking and Tooth Decay

Many parents across the country will issue a common refrain at dinnertime tonight: “You’d better eat that, it’s good for you!” Or maybe on occasion, you’ll hear a parent say, “Don’t eat that, it’ll rot your teeth!” Now more than ever, kids are faced with a bewildering array of food choices — from fresh produce to sugar-laden processed convenience meals and snack foods. What children eat may affect not only their general health but also their oral health.

Americans are consuming foods and drinks high in sugar and starches more often and in larger portions than ever before. It’s clear that “junk” foods and drinks gradually have replaced nutritious beverages and foods for many people. For example, the average teenage boy in the U.S. consumes 81 gallons of soft drinks each year! Alarmingly, a steady diet of sugary foods and drinks can ruin teeth, especially among those who snack throughout the day. Common activities may contribute to the tendency toward tooth decay. These include “grazing” habitually on foods with minimal nutritional value, and frequently sipping on sugary drinks.

When sugar is consumed over and over again in large, often hidden amounts, the harmful effect on teeth can be dramatic. Sugar on teeth provides food for bacteria, which produce acid. The acid in turn can eat away the enamel on teeth.

Almost all foods have some type of sugar that cannot and should not be eliminated from our diets. Many of these foods contain important nutrients and add enjoyment to eating. But there is a risk for tooth decay from a diet high in sugars and starches. Starches can be found in everything from bread to pretzels to salad dressing, so read labels and plan carefully for a balanced, nutritious diet for you and your kids.

Reduce your children’s risk of tooth decay:

- Sugary foods and drinks should be consumed with meals. Saliva production increases during meals and helps neutralize acid production and rinse food particles from the mouth.
- Limit between-meal snacks. If kids crave a snack, offer them nutritious foods.
- If your kids chew gum, make it sugarless. Chewing sugarless gum after eating can increase saliva flow and help wash out food and decay-producing acid.
- Monitor beverage consumption. Instead of soft drinks all day, children should also choose water and low-fat milk.
- Help your children develop good brushing and flossing habits.
- Schedule regular dental visits.

(Source: American Dental Association)

"Public Health: Here to give your baby a healthy start."
What to Keep in your Emergency Car Kit

Everyone should have an emergency car kit in their automobile, especially during the cold, winter months.

Here is what your kit should include:

- Box to hold everything
- Water (at least 1 bottle/seat belt in the car, preferably more during the summer or if you live in a hot climate)
- High-energy snacks
- Flashlight
- Batteries (store outside flashlight for longer shelf life)
- Wet wipes
- Toilet paper roll (store easily by rolling off the roll onto your hand and place in a ziplock bag)
- Basic first aid kit
- Blanket/towels
- Change of clothes for children (or yourself if you want)
- Diapers (if you have children)
- Books for reading
- Jumper cables
- Hand sanitizer
- Pen & paper
- Pocket knife
- $5-$20 cash (and change)

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