

## Frequently Asked Questions about...

# Respiratory Hygiene/Cough Etiquette

### **Q. What is respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette?**

A. Respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette are terms used to describe infection prevention measures to decrease the transmission of respiratory illness (e.g., influenza and cold viruses). A respiratory infection is spread when a person who is infected with a virus coughs or sneezes. The droplets released from an ill person's cough or sneeze can travel for several feet reaching the nose or mouth of others and causing illness. Viruses can spread easily from person to person through direct contact via touching or shaking hands. Droplets can also live for a short time on a variety of objects in the environment such as bed rails, door knobs, wheelchairs, or patient care equipment where they can be touched by another person.

Because some individuals cough without having respiratory infections (e.g., persons with chronic obstructive lung disease), we do not always know who is infectious and who is not. Therefore, respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette are very important components to protecting yourself from illness and preventing others from becoming ill. Like hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene is part of the standard precautions that should be taken to prevent the spread of disease.

### **Q. What measures are included in respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette?**

A. Respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette include a number of measures developed to prevent the spread of respiratory infections in healthcare facilities, especially in facilities where patients, employees, and visitors may not be immediately recognized as having a respiratory infection.

For healthcare facilities, some of these measures may need to be adapted to the type of facility, and the types of persons (employees, patients, and visitors) in the facility. The elements of respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette include:

- Education of patients, families, visitors, and care providers about how respiratory infections are transmitted and respiratory illness can be prevented. This includes asking family members, visitors, and care providers to stay home if they are sick.
- Use of posted signs (in languages appropriate to the population served) with instructions and pictures about how to cover your cough and wash your hands.
- Availability and use of disposal tissues when coughing and sneezing, and reminders to dispose of used tissues properly.
- Use of a mask for a person who is coughing. A mask should only be used if the patient can tolerate the mask and until the person can be placed in a location where risks to others are minimized.
- Spatial separation of the person with a respiratory infection from others. Since droplets travel through the air for 3-6 feet, separating an ill person from others by more than 3 feet decreases risk of transmission. If a patient is ill and shares a room, the use of curtains or screens between beds can limit dispersal of droplets.
- Stressing hand hygiene after contact with respiratory secretions. This applies to the patient, family members, visitors, employees, and care providers.

*Contact your local health department if you have additional questions about respiratory hygiene or cough etiquette*