

News Column for Week of March 9, 2020

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Use common sense to protect from coronavirus

K-State experts say washing hands frequently is among best defense

As Americans brace for the impact of the new coronavirus in the United States, a pair of Kansas State University specialists say the best defense against the emerging threat may be one of the most simple.

“If you’re feeling panicked about the coronavirus – or not – go wash your hands,” said Erin Yelland, a K-State Research and Extension specialist in adult development and aging. “That is truly one of the best preventative actions we can take.”

In fact, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the country’s leading medical authority on emerging health threats, lists hand-washing at the top of a short list of preventative steps Americans can take toward COVID-19, which is the particular strain of coronavirus now in the news.

The CDC’s recommendations include:

- Wash hands often for 20 seconds with soap and water.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Cover your mouth with your sleeve or a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Seek medical care for fever, cough or difficulty breathing.

In addition, experts are encouraging Americans to avoid close contact with people who are sick and to disinfect surfaces and objects that are touched frequently. Those who feel sick should stay home or seek medical care immediately.

“Preventing sickness from this particular virus is like a lot of other respiratory viruses that circulate this time of year,” said Londa Nwadike, a food safety specialist whose academic background is in public health. “The same steps we have taken to prevent getting the flu are important for stopping this virus, as well.”

Nwadike said reports of coronavirus in the U.S. is not cause for panic, but should be taken seriously. She said that Americans should routinely read updates and information from the CDC, and in Kansas, from the Kansas Department of the Health and Environment.

“For a lot of things, it’s good to be prepared, whether it’s coronavirus or influenza or anything else,” Nwadike said. “Do things based on science, not just because everyone else is doing it.”

Yelland urged older adults to be especially attentive to taking care of themselves.

“Older adults are at heightened risk of complications from many illnesses – such as the flu, pneumonia, norovirus, and coronavirus – and need to take appropriate precautions,” she said. “Taking these precautions is something we should be doing every day, not just when there is a global issue. In such institutional settings as nursing homes, the precautions are very much the same: wash your hands, limit visitation from sick family members, and group people who are ill in the same area or wing.”

Yelland cited a recent report in the Journal of the American Medical Association that indicated the fatality rate of coronavirus in China was 1% to 2%. “However, the fatality rate is as high as 8% to 15% among older adults in China,” she said.

“But higher fatality rates are not only limited to the coronavirus; 0.1% of the population that gets the flu in America will die from it, and 90% of those deaths are among adults 65 and older,” Yelland said. “Age is clearly a huge risk factor for complications, hospitalizations and death from many viruses and illnesses. As such, older adults must be diligent in their hand-washing, staying away from others who are sick, and staying up-to-date on all vaccinations, including their yearly flu shot.”

The CDC has published a fact sheet to answer additional questions about coronavirus. Persons with any doubts on whether they have been sickened by the coronavirus should seek medical assistance.

For additional information and links to publications about coronavirus, visit our website at: www.southwind.ksu.edu. “Like” Southwind Extension District on Facebook for the most current updates and information.

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

U.S. Centers for Disease Control, coronavirus – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Kansas Department of Health, coronavirus -- <http://www.kdheks.gov/coronavirus>

Journal of the American Medical Association, report of coronavirus in China -
- <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2762130>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Share Facts About COVID-19 -- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/share-facts.html>