

INFLUENZA IS NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT

Get the facts about swine flu before you pass it on — to me

I get eight hours of sleep a night, I exercise on a regular basis, I take my daily dose of vitamins, I drink plenty of water; yet even with the best of intentions to stay healthy, I can't help but feel that others are out to get me this flu season.

Flu prevention is pretty simple: stay home when you're sick (have stock of medications, food and DVDs), cough and sneeze into your arm — not your hand — and wash your hands frequently. If I can do it anyone can.

According to the federal government's website, H1N1 (a.k.a. swine flu) spreads like any other flu, when infected persons cough or sneeze they spew out germs which than can enter the nose, ears or mouth of another person.

I had a particularly close brush with H1N1 at the supermarket the other afternoon.

As I often do, I head to the grocery store after work. A woman on a mission, I go straight to the produce section rattling off my list in my head as I speed-walk through the stands of fruits and vegetables.

Romaine lettuce, check; bananas, check; carrots, check; I steer my cart towards the apples, oblivious of those around me. As I reach for a Granny Smith, a woman with straggly hair and bags under her eyes lurches back and lets out a whopping sneeze that sends germs spraying out — at 160 kilometres per hour — everywhere.

She looks at me apologetically and shrugs as if to say, "Sorry, but everyone is sick you know."

I want to shake her and scream, "No! Not everyone is sick. I'm not, yet."

Aborting the apples I make a beeline for the cash register and home to a good scrubbing.

Empty cupboards are no excuse to forget the common courtesy of covering our mouth when we sneeze or cough; and of staying away from others when we are sick. It seems to me the sicker people are, the more inclined they are to wander the streets spreading germs. If people aren't rushing out to get groceries then they are rushing to the doctor to confirm that what they have is in fact, H1N1.

Waiting rooms and beds at hospitals are filling up. Some are genuinely sick with severe symptoms, most of us will recover within a week to 10 days. Sadly, between 2,000 and 8,000 Canadians die of influenza annually.

We are responsible for spreading germs all the way from their couch to the emergency room (viruses can live on hard surfaces for up to 48 hours).

Doctors, nurses and websites tell us that if our symptoms worsen to see our doctor and to please call ahead. Yes, common etiquette can save us from the worst flu pandemic our region has seen in years. But in the meantime I've stocked up on hand sanitizer. **TL**