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Contagious Illness/Infectious Disease Recommendations

Messiah University

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Purpose: Several contagious illnesses pose a threat to both individuals and the entire campus community. These illnesses include viral, bacterial, and fungal infections, and most commonly affect the upper and lower respiratory tract, gut, and skin. To address the ongoing threat of illness, it is helpful to have a policy on how community members should respond to illness, and what precautions should be taken to prevent spread. In order to determine appropriate prevention of spread, it is helpful to identify the mechanism of spread for the most common illness:

Airborne:

These illnesses include (but are not limited to): Tuberculosis, COVID-19, Varicella (chickenpox), Meningitis, Measles, Pertussis, and Influenza. Our best hope at preventing individual infection and campus wide spread of airborne illnesses in most cases is vaccination. Varicella, Meningitis, Mumps, Pertussis (TDAP) and Measles vaccines are mandated for our students. Vaccines for COVID-19 and Influenza are encouraged on an annual basis, though not mandated. Our students are also screened for Tuberculosis and if they are high risk, undergo further testing.

When there is an outbreak of an airborne disease that we do not yet have a vaccine for, or for which the vaccine is not effective, the best methods of spread prevention is masking, and isolation/quarantine. In some extreme cases (i.e., novel influenza/COVID strain, measles outbreak) we may be advised by our local or state public health department to close our campus.

At Messiah University, all individuals who test positive for or are suspicious that they may have an airborne illness are encouraged to always mask (with a KN95 mask or better) around others for the duration of their contagious window period, as directed by a health authority or care provider. Masks are available in several locations on campus, including the Engle Center. If someone is ill, they are encouraged to avoid crowded/public spaces. If this person lives off campus, they should not report to campus until they are feeling improved and/or can tolerate wearing a mask while indoors with others during their contagious period. Faculty and supervisors are asked to work with the ill individual to accommodate missed time/assignments within reason. In some cases, when illness is extended beyond a few days, faculty or supervisors may need to ask for medical documentation of illness.

Persons at high risk for poor outcomes from these illnesses or who cannot be vaccinated, are also encouraged to mask preventatively.

Respiratory/Droplet:

Most airborne illnesses can *also* be spread through droplets, but there are some illnesses that require the respiratory droplets to spread, such as the common cold and strep throat. The key tools to combat the spread of these illnesses are masks (surgical masks are acceptable), handwashing, social distancing, and the cleaning of surfaces. It is important that anyone with a diagnosed droplet spread illness either distance or mask and wash their hands and surfaces regularly.

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Contact:

Contact spread can occur with viral, fungal, or bacterial infections. Common examples on college campuses is MRSA (staph infections), ringworm, or mononucleosis. Topical medications are often required to treat these infections and prevent their spread. Cleansing frequently used surfaces (i.e., gym equipment) and engaging in frequent handwashing can go a long way to prevent the spread of these types of infections.

Sexually transmitted:

Sexually transmitted diseases exist on most college campuses, and Messiah is no exception. Abstaining from sexual intercourse prior to marriage/monogamy, or use of prophylactic barriers such as condoms/dental dams are the recommended preventions. Some sexually transmissible diseases (Herpes simplex, gonorrhea, syphilis, HPV) can also potentially be spread through saliva/kissing, while others (HIV, Chlamydia) generally require oral or penetrative intercourse. Sexually active persons should elect to have regular STI screenings, which can be performed confidentially and at a low cost in the Engle Health Center.

Foodborne:

Many bacterial, viral, and parasitic infections are spread through contact with food. Food poisoning caused by contamination, and is generally not contagious, however, there are viruses and bacteria that can survive the gut and be passed on to others through food contamination after the handler's illness, such as salmonella and clostridium. The most common cause of foodborne illness in the United States is norovirus. Norovirus (also known as the cruise ship virus) spreads rapidly from person to person. Norovirus causes intense gastrointestinal symptoms, such as pain, vomiting, and diarrhea. It replicates in the GI tract and is expelled from the body in vomit and stool. This virus is not killed by alcohol-based hand sanitizers, so the best course of action is handwashing (for a minimum of 20 seconds) and bleach-based cleaning of bathroom surfaces. To prevent spread of this illness, persons who have diarrhea or vomiting should not engage in food preparation for others while ill and wash their hands well and frequently even after illness resolves, as the virus often continues to be shed weeks after the symptoms recede.

The burden of contagious illness prevention lies with each of us. There are things we all can do to prevent our own illness (receiving vaccines, washing hands) and things we must do to prevent spreading our illnesses to others (washing hands and surfaces, masking, staying home, keeping a distance from others). We do these things to care for ourselves and our campus community, and to ensure a safer environment for all. Persons living on campus should discuss and agree on an infection control plan with their roommates prior to living together. Such a plan would include whether or not an ill roommate would be expected to mask or go home when ill. Isolation and quarantine spaces will not be provided by Messiah University. When you are ill and in need of counsel, seek medical care and advice. The Engle Health Center offers affordable rapid on-site tests for strep, flu, COVID-19, and mononucleosis, and can send testing to the lab for a variety of other infections. Students have access to on-campus medical staff Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm at the Engle Center, and virtual care through TimelyMD 24/7. Please utilize these resources.