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Shopping: protect yourself and others from the flu

Shop until you drop, but not from the flu.

This year, the holiday shopping season could make or break Oregon retailers. Oregon Public Health Division wants Oregonians to know that fear of the flu should not keep them away from stores and malls, but shoppers should make flu prevention a priority.

“Everyday prevention can protect people from the flu, no matter where they are or what they are doing,” says Mel Kohn, M.D., M.P.H., Oregon Public Health Division director.

Influenza virus is spread by droplets from coughs and sneezes, and a sneeze can travel at least three feet. Studies have shown that flu viruses can survive on hard surfaces and can infect a person for two to eight hours after being left on items like store countertops, door handles and food court tables. But there are several things people can do to protect themselves while shopping throughout the busy season.

Think before you touch:

- Wipe shopping cart handles with disinfecting wipes.
- Be discriminating when picking up merchandise.
- Use automatic doors or push doors open with your body, not hand.
- Press elevators buttons with your elbow.
- Avoid handling “samplers” of lotion or perfume; think before trying a food sample.

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- Clean hands after touching cash machines and pens.
- Consider carrying disinfecting wipes to clean food court tables and other frequently used surfaces.

Wash your hands:

- Carry hand sanitizer.
- Wash with soap and water before eating anything.

Don't spread germs:

- Stay home if you're feeling sick.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with something other than your hand.
- Get vaccinated as soon as possible.

In addition, businesses can help protect their employees and their customers by providing tissues and hand sanitizers at checkout counters, supplying disinfecting wipes near shopping carts, encouraging workers to stay home when ill and posting the basic preventive measures: wash your hands, cover your cough and stay home when you're sick. Oregon Public Health's Web site, www.flu.oregon.gov has a business poster and business toolkit available for download.

For more information, visit www.oregon.flu.gov or call the Oregon Public Health Flu hotline at 1-800-978-3040.

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