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Spread joy, not germs: stay healthy this holiday season

'Tis the season of celebratory gatherings, and – unfortunately – the spread of seasonal illness. With influenza and other seasonal illnesses already impacting communities across the province, Alberta Health Services (AHS) is encouraging all Albertans to protect their health, with these simple steps.

Get immunized: Immunization is the single most effective way of arming yourself against influenza viruses already circulating in our communities. Influenza vaccine continues to be offered to all Albertans (six months of age and older), free of charge. Remember: it takes up to two weeks after receiving your influenza immunization to be protected against influenza, so make plans to get immunized today! Find clinic schedules at www.albertahealthservices.ca/influenza or call Health Link Alberta at 1.866.408.5465.

Cover your cough: Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when sneezing or coughing. If you don't have a tissue, always cough or sneeze into your arm, not into your hands. Throw away tissues after wiping your nose or covering a cough, and wash your hands.

Clean your hands: Using soap and warm water, wash your hands thoroughly and often, including after coughing, sneezing, using tissues or the washroom, and before eating or preparing foods. Alcohol-based hand rub or sanitizer can also be helpful if hands are not visibly soiled. Make a point of keeping hands and fingers away from your eyes, nose and mouth.

Stay home if you're sick: If you're experiencing illness, stay home from work, school, daycare, or any social function. Please also do not visit family, friends or loved ones in hospitals, care facilities or seniors lodges, until you have fully recovered.

Mind your food prep: If you are sick, do not prepare food for anyone, until fully recovered. When you are cooking, always keep safe food handling practices top of mind. To help you with the turkey task, follow AHS' Turkey Tips at www.albertahealthservices.ca/turkeytips

Around the house: Keep household surfaces clean, using a household cleaner. Think creatively when hosting gatherings: put a bowl on a hand sanitizer pump and leave it out for guests to use; choose pre-wrapped candies or single serve food items instead of offering bowls of unwrapped snacks to all. Always thank others for declining invites due to illness.

Year-round: Keep yourself in good health by covering the basics: get enough rest, eat a balanced diet including at least five servings of fruit and vegetables each day, and exercise regularly. Finally, if you drink alcohol, do so in moderation and don't drink and drive.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.