

Katie Johnson: Good morning and welcome to Apple a Day, Lake Region Health Care's health and wellness show where we feature news and information you can use to live a healthier life. I am Katie Johnson your host. And my guest today is Sarah Brunn. She is our infection prevention coordinator and she's here to talk with us about national hand washing awareness week. Good morning, Sarah.

Sarah Brunn: Good morning, Katie.

Katie Johnson: Well let's frame this up by saying that today starts the December 4th through 10th national hand washing awareness week, and it maybe is one that might be passed over because we think well, we all wash our hands all the time, what more could we possibly need to know about that. But we're here to learn more about maybe some misconceptions and how to better care for ourselves when it comes to infection prevention. And to start off with, let's talk about who you are, our listeners might recognize you from being on our show in your previous role. But tell us about what you're doing at Lake Region Health Care now.

Sarah Brunn: All right. So, I am Sarah Brunn. I am currently the infection prevention coordinator for Lake Region Health Care. I've been in this role since late Summer, so still pretty new into this role. Previously I was in the emergency department primarily as the emergency department director over the last few years. But I've been at Lake Region Health Care for almost 15 years. I am an RN and have had my RN for longer than that. 16, 17 years. So this is a brand new role for me, but something that I'm really excited about.

Katie Johnson: So let's talk about it a little bit more. Elaborate on the practice of infection prevention here at Lake Region Health Care. What's involved with that? Is there any specific focus areas or any things you're finding particularly interesting about this field as you've begun to work in it?

Sarah Brunn: Sure. Infection prevention is the prevention of transmission of communicable diseases in the health care setting. So that includes taking care of our patients, our visitors and our employees. We monitor patients in the hospital for health care associated infections. We monitor for infectious illnesses within the community and we also watch for multi-drug resistant organisms. So those are those scary bugs that are hard to kill with antibiotics. We also work towards antibiotic stewardship which is the practice of ensuring that antibiotics are prescribed appropriately, so not prescribed for illnesses that don't require antibiotics, and also making sure that the right antibiotic is treating the infection that's going on.

Sarah Brunn: Then we also watch for compliance throughout the organization with infection control precautions. Hand washing, high level disinfection, we look at the facilities make sure that all of those things are working well to prevent infection. So it's a very, very broad practice.

Katie Johnson: It is, and it entails a lot of things. What inspired you to move into infection prevention?

Sarah Brunn: You know, I just have always enjoyed learning and expanding my scope of practice. I find it incredibly interesting. As well as I really enjoy systems management and this is something that I can do that allows me to work on practice and make improvements throughout the organization.

Katie Johnson: Well, I'm glad that you're using your talents towards that. We always hear about viral outbreaks this time of the year. It's high season. Can you elaborate on why this happens? Why there's this influx as Winter comes upon us?

Sarah Brunn: So this is all speculation. There isn't hard science as to exactly why these things get worse in the winter. But they feel that the Influenza virus, as well as other viruses that cause upper respiratory infections like RSV and the common cold, might survive better in colder, dryer climates. So that's what happens in the winter, it gets dry it gets cold. Also, people spend more time indoors with sealed windows so they're more likely to rebreathe the same air, and they're in close contact with other people. Also, days are shorter, so that lack of sunlight leads to lower levels of Vitamin D and Melatonin. Which affect our immune system. So our immune system tends not to be as strong in the winter months.

Katie Johnson: So, Kind of a perfect storm maybe of a lot of different things coming together. I've heard that hand hygiene is one of, if not the most important thing we can do to prevent illness. I don't know if that's true or not, but let's define or explain what that term means. What is proper hand hygiene?

Sarah Brunn: So, proper hand hygiene is hand washing or using a hand foam or gel to clean your hands. For hand-washing, you want to wet your hands, apply soap, and wash your hands for 20 seconds. Which seems like a really long time. If we think about ... if you watch someone else wash their hands, usually it's getting them quick wet and a simple soap and washing them off and they're done. But appropriate hand-washing lasts 20 seconds. So scrub between your fingers, under your nails, the top of your hands. Rinse well, dry off your hand and then you want to make sure that you turn off the water with something that's not your hands. So use a towel to turn off the water.

Sarah Brunn: Or the alternative would be to utilize a hand sanitizer. You can use these if your hands aren't visibly soiled. They're not going to do anything if your hands are visibly soiled and you want to use soap or water. But otherwise, you can use an alcohol based hand sanitizer. And make sure you use an adequate amount and that your hands stay wet. They stay for about 30 seconds. So that means using a really decent amount of hand sanitizer to stay wet for that length of time.

Katie Johnson: Yeah, so we talk about covering your cough, or covering your sneeze too. And then washing your hands or using hand sanitizer. These are really common things to talk about when it comes to preventing infection. I'm wondering if

there are some widely accepted truths about germ fighting that are actually false. Are there some misconceptions that we could clear up?

Sarah Brunn: I think we think that hand sanitizer kills everything and it really does not. There are some bugs, especially those that produce spores which generally come from our gut. So if you have gastroenteritis or there's an illness called C-Diff that isn't killed by hand sanitizer, in those cases you want to ensure that you're washing your hands really well with soap and water to prevent the spread of those illnesses. And also, natural cleansers may not be effective in this case either. So if you have a gut bug, so the stomach flu like we would say, those things you want to make sure that you're using a bleach spray to clean up the bathroom afterwards, and that you're washing your hands with soap and water.

Katie Johnson: Really good advice. So there are a number of experts on both sides of the natural versus commercial disinfection debate. You kind of mentioned that. Do you personally favor the use of commercial or natural disinfectant products for both hands and surfaces? Or what's your take on that?

Sarah Brunn: So commercial disinfectants are more effective at killing germs overall. So if somebody in your house has an active infection then I would recommend using commercial disinfectants.

Katie Johnson: Okay.

Sarah Brunn: Otherwise in your home, generally it's your own germs that are there. And we aren't necessarily going to get sick from our own germs. So if nobody is sick then use your natural cleaners. It also, I would say, there's the potential that those commercial disinfectants could be promoting antiseptic resistance. So if there's nobody sick at home, feel free to use the natural stuff.

Katie Johnson: And just save that for the high times when there is a known infection present.

Sarah Brunn: Right.

Katie Johnson: That's good advice. 2017 in time, there was an article that showed that our cellphones have 10 times more germs than most toilet seats. That is really, ishy thought. So when I think about that, do you have some tips for cleaning our devices? Our cellphones, our keyboards, the things that our hands touch so many times a day that we maybe don't think about being a high infection risk.

Sarah Brunn: So your priority really needs to be washing your hands. Wash your hands frequently, make sure you're washing your hands before and after you eat, before and after you go to the bathroom. Those things will help protect the items that you touch frequently.

Katie Johnson: Sure.

Sarah Brunn: So that's really your biggest thing. If you do want to wash your cellphone, and you're not sick doing it, a couple times a week is fine with just an alcohol based cleaner. So you can use rubbing alcohol and a little bit of water to wipe off your phone. But otherwise washing your hands is the most important part of that.

Katie Johnson: Such timely advice since it is hand-washing week, right? As parents we help our children when they're washing their hands and telling them to cover their mouths. Any tips for when it comes to helping our children keep their best hand-washing and infection prevention tips when they're away from home, when we're not looking over their shoulder?

Sarah Brunn: Right. So this is from personal experience, not from a health care resource. But, you just want to make it habit for your child to wash their hands at appropriate times and to cover their cough when they're coughing and those types of things. So the more consistent you are, the better example you are with your children for doing those things, the better they're going to learn. If they get to the point where they're always washing their hands at home at appropriate times without you reminding them, then that's a good queue that they're going to do well out in the communities.

Katie Johnson: Good point, it's all about building that habit. I know we're talking about hand-washing, but it's the time of year that vaccination, especially the flu shot comes up as well. But vaccination in general as an infection prevention tactic, what are your thoughts on that and how the flu season is going. Is it still a good time to get flu shots, for example, now that we're into December.

Sarah Brunn: Yeah, absolutely. Getting your Influenza vaccine is the most effective way that they've found to stop the spread of Influenza itself. So we know that this vaccine is not perfect, they update it every year and it's all based on prediction of what type of Influenza is going to mutate that year. So we know it's not perfect, but it is the most effective way that we can stop the spread of Influenza. So it also decreases the likelihood that you will have severe illness. So if you do get Influenza after having the vaccination, the likelihood is you're not going to get as sick with it. Then we also need to think about that vaccine from a public health perspective. So you yourself might be young and healthy, but not everyone around you can say that. So you think about most of us have people in our lives that are vulnerable. They're really young, so under the age of two, or elderly, over the age of 65. That population, if they get Influenza it can be life threatening for them. So it's very dangerous. So if you think about taking care of the people in your life, you're going to get your Influenza vaccine to prevent the spread of that illness to those important people.

Katie Johnson: Right, and timing wise December is still an appropriate time to get the flu shot?

Sarah Brunn: Absolutely. So we start to see an upswing. And actually this has been a pretty mild Influenza season so far. But this would typically be when we start to see people coming in with Influenza. And it will continue through April. So you want

to get your flu shot, even if it's now. You don't have to have an appointment, you can just call patient care at the clinic and they can give you that vaccine without having a physician's appointment.

Katie Johnson: Oh, perfect. So, if you could leave our audience with one take home message for the flu season, what would it be?

Sarah Brunn: Wash your hands. Wash your hands frequently and get your flu shot.

Katie Johnson: Oh, perfect. Our infection prevention coordinator Sarah Brunn, our guest today. As we kick off national hand-washing week. We hope that this will put that good reminder in your head this week that will become a habit for the entire Influenza season, and just for good infection prevention and good hygiene year young. Thanks for your tips today, Sarah.

Sarah Brunn: Thanks Katie.

Katie Johnson: Sarah Brunn and Katie Johnson on Apple a Day. Today reminding you there is so much to do here, wash your hands and stay healthy for it. Have a great day.