

COURAGE TO CARE

A Health Campaign of Uniformed Services University, www.usuhs.edu, and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Bethesda, Maryland, www.CSTSonline.org

PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES: *Implications for Military Families and their Health*

Public health emergencies, such as global pandemics, create numerous opportunities and challenges around public health communication, preparedness, and response. Healthcare providers play a significant role in medical intervention (disease surveillance, identification, and treatment) and in influencing patient behaviors for protecting individual, family, and public health. This can be in the form of education about basic hygiene such as hand-washing and cough etiquette to more complex

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disaster behaviors such as shelter-in-place or evacuation.

Public health emergencies always involve issues of homeland security and defense. Because our military plays a central role in our national security, their health and the health of their families and children is very important. This *Courage to Care* focuses on public health emergencies and their implications for military families and their health.

Unique Characteristics of Military Family Life

The military community is a population on the move. Families may relocate multiple times within short periods of time within or outside of the country. Relocation, especially during times of public health emergencies, may increase exposure to disease. Moving also can be a barrier to healthcare access and continuity. As families move to new areas, healthcare providers may not be as familiar with these new families and their specific health needs.

During times of public health crisis, military healthcare providers need to be especially sensitive and alert to stressors and issues that relate to military families and military family life. These include:

- Raised anxiety about the health and wellbeing of loved ones who are deployed. Likewise, those who are deployed will worry about their loved ones back home.
- Single parent families due to deployment often include young caretakers who may lack experience in the role of protecting their family's health, especially during public health crises.
- Military families with special needs children who may require additional medical and emotional support.
- Families, especially those affected by combat injury, whose children live with grandparents who may be more vulnerable to influenza.

- Families of the combat injured who may be concerned about health risks visiting loved ones in hospitals or rehabilitation facilities.

The changing nature of public health emergencies may create the need for additional public health interventions such as travel limitations and quarantine. These can produce more anxiety in families already experiencing stress.

Patients as Public Health Partners

- Advise patients (adults and children) to practice good hygiene: CDC recommends hand-washing on a regular basis, especially after coughing or sneezing; covering one's nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and throwing used tissues in the trash; and, importantly, staying home if one feels or is sick.
- Recommend that patients monitor information about the health crisis on a regular basis and be alert to changes and prevention measures (see information links at the end of this fact sheet).

Providers as Public Health Partners

During public health emergencies, the Department of Health and Human Services coordinates disease surveillance, medical preparedness, and guidance to public health professionals. Centers for Disease Control and

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Prevention has responsibility for identifying and tracking the spread of the disease and for communicating health-related information to the government, media, and public. Tell patients if someone they know becomes ill with flu-like symptoms, especially if they have traveled to an affected area, to contact their doctor to determine indicated testing and treatment.

Healthcare providers who suspect an infectious disease outbreak should follow local guidance and initiate the appropriate procedure for obtaining, testing, and storing infectious disease samples. State or local health departments should be contacted to help facilitate transport to and timely diagnosis from a state public health laboratory.

The role of the primary care healthcare provider, especially in times of public health emergencies, is critical for disease identification, treatment, and surveillance. Health professionals can educate patients (adults and children) about basic hygiene including family health behaviors to avoid spread and exposure to disease. Staying alert to changes can impact individual and family health, preparedness, and response.

Important Public Health Emergency Links

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (English and Spanish)
www.cdc.gov
- American Red Cross:
www.redcross.org
- Your local American Red Cross chapter can be located at:
<https://www.redcross.org/find-your-local-chapter.html>
- U.S. Department of Defense Military Health System (military unique health information)
www.health.mil/
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (Uniformed Services University)
www.cstsonline.org

Courage to Care is a health promotion campaign of Uniformed Services University and its Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS). CSTS is the academic arm and a partnering Center of the Defense Centers of Excellence (5DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.



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