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## Moose come clean with H1N1 precautions

Sanitation key to minimizing any potential impact

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Manitoba Moose Equipment Manager Jason McMaste sanitizes equipment using the Sports O Zone machine which kills bacteria including H1N1.

Is H1N1 the new Y2K?

The American Hockey League's Manitoba Moose are taking no chances on front lines of flu fighting, employing every precaution and element of common sense they can muster to protect the health of the team.

The team's enforcer -- off the ice, that is -- is head athletic therapist Rob Milette, who was already a trained bug vigilante.

He said the team's medical bay is always on alert for health threats like colds and flu, and that this hockey season will be no different.

But Milette said that given the H1N1's apparent ease of transmission, extra attention will be paid to symptoms.

"The (H1N1) flu itself is no more dangerous than the common flu," Milette said this week.

"It's just that much more susceptible to transmission. It's easier to catch, and that's why it has spread so quickly. The effects on two people, one with each kind of flu, are basically the same, but it can be transferred that much more quickly.

"Our guys have been instructed to constantly wash their hands with anti-bacterial soap. We have hand sanitizers around the room. Sharing sweat towels, we'll try to keep that to a minimum, so every period of a game we're changing to fresh towels. And on the bench with water bottles, same thing.

"If anybody has any symptoms, they're getting quarantined from the team, basically. Especially if we're on the road, they'll get their own room."

This week, for instance, forward Alexandre Bolduc wasn't feeling well on Tuesday and was ordered to stay home and away from the team.

He did not play Tuesday but was feeling better quickly on Wednesday, so the alert had passed.

Milette said team members will not be tested for H1N1 at every turn, only if there is an extended period where the player or coach isn't gradually feeling better.

But in each case, monitoring the symptoms will be constant.

"Anybody with symptoms has been instructed to come speak to me right away," Milette said. "We're trying to minimize the effects. We know the flu has a mind of its own. It's going to get who it's going to get, but we'll do what we can to limit the amount of exposure and contact and germs between players and players."

Moose coach Scott Arniel said he's confident this serious health issue for his team is in good hands.

"We're trying to be proactive," Arniel said. "Rob has always been very proactive. When guys come with symptoms, he jumps on it right away with things like medication or giving days off to keep them away from the other guys."

The Moose are currently having an internal discussion on the benefits of receiving the H1N1 vaccination when it becomes available.

"Our head physician, we've had discussions with him to see if it's prudent for the players to be immunized because of all the travel," Milette said. "It won't be available until November and I think they'd like to immunize the more high-risk part of the population first and I think because we travel so much, we probably fall into that high-risk area. I think if we end up getting these shots (made available),

I'll make it mandatory for our players."

The Moose have also acquired a sanitizing device called the Sports O Zone machine.

It looks much like an industrial dishwasher and can hold all the hockey equipment -- from skates to helmets and everything in between -- of two players at a time.

The machine kills 99.9 per cent of bacteria, equipment manager Jason McMaster said, and a welcome side-effect of that kind of cleanliness is that it actually makes hockey equipment smell better.

"We have a constant rotation going in (to the machine)," McMaster said. "Probably the stuff of two players goes in there every day."

While the Moose can modify some of their off-ice practices to try to combat H1N1 flu, it's highly unlikely the team would stop practising or playing if a few members of the squad contracted the strain.

If one player contracts H1N1, "we'll treat it like any other flu," Milette said. "We'll quarantine that player until the incubation period is over and move on from there."

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Floors you can eat off

Cleanliness is believed to be a main tool in the prevention of flu and it's hard to believe the Manitoba Moose dressing room could be any cleaner than it has been since the team moved into the MTS Centre in 2004.

One reason is that GM Craig Heisinger, himself a former NHL equipment manager, is a stickler for floors you could eat from and neatness and tidiness throughout the complex.

"This dressing room is one of the cleanest," head coach Scott Arniel said. "An awful lot of pride is taken every day to make sure that floors are clean and everything's wiped down.

"Our players need to do their part to keep things as clean as possible, and this year, with H1N1 out there, we have all kinds of sanitary things like washing their hands and that if anybody gets sick, we try to keep them away from the dressing room or other players."

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