

Quit hogging the H1N1 virus please

By Tim Gard, CSP, CPAE

I'm a professional traveler; in fact, in my career as a humorist I've flown more than 1.5 million miles and spoken at over 1,500 conferences from Texas to Tasmania.

I'm aware of the variety of health-related issues that have come with inexpensive access to travel by the millions of people I share the planet with. I'm also aware that not only do people from all over travel easily and frequently, but some don't have the same access to health care that I have taken for granted most of my life.

As such, I travel smart, but I don't travel hysterically, nor do I overreact. Most professional travelers share this approach. However, since the latest H1N1 flu scare, I've noticed how even savvy travelers have fallen prey to the media hype surrounding this latest potential virus contagion.

What do I mean by traveling smart? Well, I've always avoided using payphones and ATMs near airport bathrooms due to their reported levels of contamination. I do what I can to keep my hands clean without the need or obsession to wear a self-contained environmental suit. Traveling smart also means I avoid touching my eyes in public places; overreacting is worrying that someone else will touch my eyes while en route and infect me with a virus.

Are you with me so far?

A pandemic is a serious thing, but traveling stupid *isn't* serious. In fact, last week I encountered two travelers who left me laughing. The first sat next to me on the plane wearing a surgical mask. She refused to take it off, even to sip a beverage, explaining that she wanted to avoid catching H1N1. I told her I'm not a doctor or a nurse, but had to ask, "Are you aware that masks like the one you're wearing are designed to protect *other*

people from your germs, not to *protect you* from other people?” I then pretended to sneeze. She got up and moved to another seat. Whoo! Hoo. Extra elbow room for me!

The second encounter was outright hilarious. The person next to me on a flight to New Orleans was compulsively washing his hands with Purel every few minutes. He even offered me some. When I declined, he said, “It’s the only thing keeping me or you from catching H1N1 flu.” I paused, then looked at him and said, “You know that’s *antibacterial* lotion you’re using, right?” He said, “Yes.” Then I asked, “You know that H1N1 swine flu is a *virus*, right?” He just stared at me. So I added, “Keeping your hands clean is a good thing, but antibacterial soap only kills *bacteria* . . . not the *flu virus*.” He got up and moved. Another score! Whoo Hoo! Again, more elbow room for me.

What’s my point? In any situation you find yourself in, don’t panic. Become educated and travel smart, not stupid. I would prefer not to catch H1N1, but I don’t think that my wearing a surgical mask on the airplane or washing my hands as often as Howard Hughes will prevent this virus from spreading.

Instead, when I see someone coughing or sneezing, I’ll choose to *not* rush over and have them sneeze or cough in my face. But that’s me . . .

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