QUARANTINE:

Scary scenario, or practical approach?

Think of the word quarantine. What comes to mind? Do scenes from the movie "Outbreak" flash by, with Dustin Hoffman and René Russo donning spacesuit-gear and the military forcibly keeping people in their communities?

Will that really happen when pandemic flu strikes? Not likely. In fact, public health officials have a more realistic plan in mind.

Let's start with some definitions. **"Quarantine"** is when people who are not sick but have likely been exposed to a virus are separated from others. These people may be urged to not leave their homes or towns. A related term is **"isolation."** That's when a person who is already sick is separated from other people to reduce the chances that she or he will get others sick.

Health officials in Asia and Canada took precautions during the SARS outbreak a few years ago. But quarantine and isolation are likely to only play a small role in how communities respond to a flu pandemic. Why? Because pandemic flu spreads rapidly, and people can catch it from others who are sick but do not yet show any symptoms of being ill. (While common sense tells you to avoid the sneezing guy with the runny nose and bloodshot eyes, what about the woman who seems perfectly healthy?)

Rather than a situation like the one portrayed in an overblown Hollywood movie, scientists expect restrictive measures to be voluntary. People will be encouraged to stay home from work or school to limit interacting with others to reduce their chances of getting sick. Schools will be closed and community events cancelled. Sick people will be separated from those who are not—both in health facilities and at home.

What should you do to prepare for the possibility of staying home from work or school? We've developed materials that include items that you should stockpile to be ready for a flu pandemic or anything else that comes your way—blizzard, hurricane or another disaster. As far as seeing spacesuits in the near future, you're more likely to see them on astronauts orbiting the planet than here on Earth.