

Staying Healthy During an Influenza Pandemic

What is influenza?

Influenza, or the "flu," is a common respiratory disease caused by a virus. Every year, the flu virus causes outbreaks in fall and winter. This is because each year, the flu virus changes a little so the protection, or immunity, our bodies have built up against previous viruses is not as effective.

The flu spreads easily from person to person through coughing and sneezing and hands touching your eyes, mouth or nose. Flu symptoms can appear suddenly and include a fever, cough, fatigue, headache, muscle pain, a runny nose and a sore throat. The worst symptoms usually last about five days, but coughing can last up to two to three weeks. Sometimes children with the flu can have nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.

Although colds and other viruses may cause similar symptoms, influenza weakens a person more than other viruses. About 20 per cent of persons infected will not have any symptoms. In others, symptoms can be mild to severe. However, if infected, very young children, people with some chronic medical conditions and the elderly are more likely than healthy older children or adults to get very sick, and may need to be hospitalized. In Canada up to 7000 people die each year from influenza or its complications. People over 65 years are at the greatest risk of dying from the flu.

How is pandemic flu different?

Flu pandemics happen when a new kind of influenza virus, that is able to spread easily from person to person appears, and spreads quickly around the world. Since people have no protection against the new virus, it will likely cause more illnesses and a larger number of deaths than the seasonal flu.

Influenza pandemics have happened every ten to forty years for at least the last 500 years. There were three flu pandemics last century, the last in 1968. The most severe – often called the “Spanish Flu” pandemic – was in 1918.

No one can predict exactly when a pandemic will happen, but it may be soon. That is why people and communities must prepare now, to ensure they are ready to respond when needed.

How does influenza spread?

The flu spreads easily from person to person by:

- Breathing tiny droplets that are in the air after an infected person coughs or sneezes;
- Touching tiny droplets of nose or eye secretions from an infected person and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth; and
- Touching objects like dirty tissues or surfaces that have been handled by an infected person and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

The flu virus can be spread off of hard surfaces like doorknobs for up to twelve hours, and from softer/porous surfaces, like tissues, for several minutes. The virus can also survive on the hands for up to five minutes. This is why it is so important to wash your hands often, avoid touching surfaces in public places and avoid putting your hands in your mouth, eyes or nose.

The flu can be spread by an infected person from about one day before symptoms start to appear to as many as five days after symptoms appear, and maybe longer in children and some adults.

What can I do to keep from getting sick?

Flu vaccine, when available, will be the primary public health intervention during a flu pandemic. The provincial government is working with the federal government and other provinces and territories to ensure that there will be enough vaccine for all Canadians. Since vaccine may not be available early in a pandemic, it is important to learn and use other ways to protect yourself and your family.

There are several things you can do to reduce your chances of getting sick with the flu, and to avoid passing it to others if you are infected.

- **Have good routine health practices** like eating well, getting enough sleep and exercising regularly.
- **Get a flu shot each year.** It is the best way to protect you from getting sick from the flu each year. By getting vaccinated every year, you will also help to ensure Canada has the necessary facilities to make enough vaccine for all Canadians during a pandemic. If you are over 65 years of age, ask your doctor for a shot to protect you against pneumococcal infection.
- **Wash your hands often** and for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water, and always after you cough or sneeze. An alcohol-based hand cleaner also works if your hands do not look dirty. This is one of the best ways to protect you from the flu!
- **Practice good cough manners.** Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, or cough into your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue. Throw the used tissue into the garbage right away and wash your hands.
- **Stay home if you are sick** to make sure that you get the rest you need and so that you don't spread your germs to others.
- **Stay away from people who are sick.** You should especially try to stay at least three feet away from people sick with the flu.
- **Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth.** This is a common way to spread germs.
- **Avoid public gatherings and crowds.**
- **Call your doctor before visiting the office** while you are sick and are able to spread the illness to others. Your doctor's office will also be able to tell you if there are special clinics for people with the flu or flu-like symptoms, and where those clinics are. If you can't contact your doctor's office, call the BC NurseLine and they will be able to help you.

These things are even more important during a flu pandemic, both to protect you and your family from getting sick, and because it may be hard to get medical care as so many people may be sick at the same time.

Some people may choose to wear masks. There is no evidence that shows masks help to prevent outbreaks of the flu during a pandemic. If you feel

that you want to wear a mask, be sure to learn how to use it properly, including making sure it does not get wet and changing it often.

What about public gatherings?

The Medical Health Officer (MHO) in your region has the authority to take extra actions if required to help control the spread of flu and minimize the impact of a pandemic. These include:

- Closing community buildings including schools and community centres; and
- Cancelling group events and public gatherings.

If these actions are needed, MHOs across BC will work together to identify when these steps might need to be taken.

For more information

For more information on pandemic influenza, see the following BC HealthFiles:

[#94a What is Pandemic Influenza?](#)

[#94c Self Care During an Influenza Pandemic](#)

For more information on BC pandemic influenza preparedness, see the following Web sites:

www.health.gov.bc.ca/pandemic/index.html

www.bccdc.org/content.php?item=150

www.bchealthguide.org/bcauthorities.stm



BC Centre for Disease Control
AN AGENCY OF THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH SERVICES AUTHORITY

For more BC HealthFile topics visit
www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm,
or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

Visit BC HealthGuide OnLine – a world of health information you can trust at
www.bchealthguide.org