
Differences between seasonal or “annual” influenza and the influenza pandemic

This fact sheet provides basic information for health care workers.

There are important differences between seasonal or “annual” influenza and an influenza pandemic. Instances of influenza occur every year around the world. A pandemic, on the other hand, spreads around the world affecting many hundreds of thousands of people across many countries.

Seasonal Influenza (‘the flu’)

- Seasonal influenza occurs every year during the winter months of October to April.
- In Canada, on average, 500 - 4,500 deaths every year are due to influenza alone. Annual attack rates in Canada range from 10 to 20 per cent each year and can be considerably higher in epidemics.
- Globally, widespread outbreaks of seasonal (“annual”) influenza are estimated to kill between 500,000 to 1 million people every year.
- Most people recover from seasonal influenza within one to two weeks without medical treatment.
- Most deaths occur in at risk groups, including:
 - people over 65 years of age
 - people with existing medical conditions such as lung disease, diabetes, cancer, kidney or heart problems
 - people with compromised immune systems
 - children less than two years of age.
- Annual vaccinations, antiviral drugs and comfort measures are available for seasonal influenza.

Influenza Pandemic

- An influenza pandemic usually occurs every few decades and spreads rapidly around the world affecting many millions of people.
- Unlike seasonal influenza, which usually occurs during the winter season, an influenza pandemic can occur at any time during the year.
- A pandemic is much more serious than seasonal influenza. It affects many more people - a quarter or more of the population – and is associated with much higher rates of illness and death.
- For example, the worst pandemic in the last century – the 1918 ‘Spanish Flu’ -caused an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 deaths in Canada and up to 40 to 50 million deaths worldwide.
- Pandemic influenza is likely to cause the same symptoms as seasonal influenza but will be more severe because no one will have been exposed to this particular virus and therefore will not have immunity.
- People of all age groups may be at risk of infection with influenza pandemic.
- A vaccine against influenza pandemic will not be available at the start of pandemic as the virus will be new. It takes four to five months once the virus has been identified for a vaccine to be developed.
- In the early stages of a pandemic, antiviral drugs will be used to help lessen the impact of the pandemic through early treatment and prophylaxis.

- Ontario is stockpiling Tamiflu, the antiviral drug that is most effective against influenza. However, there will be world-wide shortages and distribution of the drug will be to those considered at greatest risk.

Annual Influenza Vaccine

- The vaccine against ordinary influenza is 70-90 per cent effective in healthy adults.
- In children, it is about 80 to 90 per cent effective in preventing influenza infection, and about 62 to 73 per cent effective in preventing illness with fever.
- In elderly people, the vaccine can prevent pneumonia and hospitalization in about six out of 10 people, and prevent death in about eight out of 10 people.

For more information

www.health.gov.on.ca/english/providers/program/emu/emu_mn.html

Or call toll free:

Health Care Provider's Hotline 1-866-212-2272