

For Our Community

QUICK FACTS about

PANDEMIC
INFLUENZA



calgary health region

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PREPARING FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

There is a great deal of effort under way, at a global, national, provincial and regional level to anticipate and respond effectively to pandemic influenza. Minimizing the impact of infectious diseases in the community, including pandemic influenza, is part of the ongoing work of Calgary Health Region and is an integral part of our mandate.

It is difficult to fully anticipate or prepare for pandemic influenza, as we don't know whether some groups will be affected more than others and as a result, what the impact on our community will be. We do know pandemic influenza will be severe and will require all health care organizations to care for more patients than usual. Despite our best planning, efforts and care, many people may die from pandemic influenza.

The Calgary Health Region has worked with *Alberta Health and Wellness* to develop a detailed and flexible contingency plan to quickly respond to pandemic influenza. The plan is a technical document aimed at health-care workers and emergency planners who will be involved in responding to pandemic influenza.

This Quick Facts Guide provides an overview of some of the information you need to know as members of the community in preparation for pandemic influenza, including important information about how you can help prevent the spread of infection and care for yourself or others if you are sick.

Additional information is available from a variety of sources which are identified on the inside back cover.

I hope this guide and the other materials produced by the Calgary Health Region will help you better understand pandemic influenza, how we are prepared to respond and what you should expect.

Dr. Brent Friesen
Medical Officer of Health
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PANDEMIC INFLUENZA: KEY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is pandemic influenza?

- Pandemic influenza is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and spreads quickly, affecting most countries and regions around the world.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Public Health Agency of Canada predict another pandemic, but cannot say exactly when it will happen. Current warnings stem from the persistence of H5N1, an avian influenza (bird flu). When it happens, it may come in two or more “waves,” several months apart. Each wave may last as little as six to eight weeks or as long as two to three months.
- A pandemic is much more serious than the “ordinary” influenza and is likely to cause many deaths, disrupt the daily life of many people and cause intense pressure on healthcare and other services.
- Every pandemic is different, and until the virus starts circulating, it is impossible to predict its full effects.

What causes a pandemic influenza?

- Pandemic influenza happens when a new influenza virus, which is very different from the commonly circulating strains, appears.
- Because it is a new virus few – if any – people have any immunity. This allows the new virus to spread widely, easily and to cause more serious illness.

Who is at risk?

- Once a pandemic influenza starts, everybody will be at risk. Until the virus starts circulating, we will not know for sure which, if any groups will be at greater risk.
- The *Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan* assumes that 15% – 35% of our population will be clinically ill such that they are unable to work or carry out other activities, with an estimated 11,000 to 58,000 deaths in Canada.
- In Alberta, it is projected that up to 2.5 million people could be infected, with up to 1.3 million Albertans becoming ill.

Is there a vaccine to protect against pandemic influenza?

- There is no vaccine ready to protect against pandemic influenza. The virus that causes pandemic influenza will be new and a vaccine to protect against it cannot be made until the virus has been identified. Even if you have had an influenza vaccine before, you will not be protected from the new virus.

- Medicines called antivirals may be used to treat pandemic influenza. However, until the pandemic virus is circulating, we won't know how well the antivirals will work.

What can I do?

- You can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of getting or spreading influenza during a pandemic by:
 - maintaining good basic hygiene (for example, washing your hands to prevent spreading the virus from your hands to your face)
 - covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
 - avoiding crowds whenever possible
- If you do catch influenza:
 - stay at home and rest
 - follow the advice in the influenza self-care guide “It’s in your hands” which tells you how to protect yourself and your family. It is available at www.health.gov.ab.ca/influenza/self_care.html
 - take medicines to relieve the symptoms (following the instructions on the package)
 - drink plenty of fluids
 - contact Health Link at 403.943.LINK (5465) or 1.866.408.LINK (5465) toll free for advice

This is both for your own health and to avoid spreading the illness to others.

How can I prepare?

You should plan ahead in case you or your family members become sick with influenza. This is especially important if you live alone, are a single parent or a caregiver.

- Have enough fluids and other supplies such as non-perishable food, water and pet food and supplies on hand to last one to two weeks
- Have medication for fever and a thermometer handy
- Know what options are available at work when you are ill or caring for a sick family member, for example, working from home
- Have a back up caregiver for loved ones
- Ensure important prescriptions are filled and that you have a two-month supply of important medicines, if possible

HOW WILL PANDEMIC INFLUENZA AFFECT CANADA?

Predicting the impact

Once pandemic influenza reaches Canada, it is expected to spread throughout the country in a matter of weeks. This will result in intense pressure on health and other essential services and disruption to many aspects of daily life.

It is currently impossible to predict when a pandemic will begin.

Illness and deaths in Canada

- Experts predict that the global death toll could range between 2 million to over 50 million deaths.
- An estimated 4.5 to 10.6 million Canadians will become ill enough that they would be unable to attend work or other activities for at least half a day.
- Between 2.1 and 5 million people would need to be seen by a doctor or receive some form of outpatient care.
- Hospital admissions for acute respiratory and related conditions are likely to increase by around 25 %, with between 34,000 and 138,000 new patients needing hospital admission in Canada.
- According to models provided by Centres for Diseases Control and Prevention, as modified by Alberta Health and Wellness, up to 743,000 people could be infected and up to 1,600 people could die in the Calgary Health Region.

Impact on health services

Pandemic influenza will place great pressure on health and social services due to the increased burden of patients needing treatment and reduced workforce available due to illness and other disruption. This could mean delays in dealing with other medical conditions.

Health services will have to be prioritized during the peak weeks of pandemic and substantial health services will be cancelled or suspended because of pressure on beds, employees and other resources. The Calgary Health Region will aim to maintain essential services to respond to immediately life threatening conditions. Suspension of services may occur before the pandemic in order to allow for staff training and to complete our planning for pandemic.

Impact on business

Pandemic influenza is likely to affect all age groups, with more than 10% of the population likely to lose working days.

- *The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan* assumes that 25% of the Canadian workforce will take five to eight working days off over a three-month period.
- During the peak of the pandemic, estimates suggest that absenteeism will double in the private sector and increase by two-thirds in the public sector. This has important implications for business continuity.

Impact on schools and community services

Pandemic influenza is likely to spread quickly in schools leading to possible closures. Schools could also be affected by employee absenteeism and disruption to transportation services.

Pandemic influenza will impact all community services including police, fire, military, fuel supply, food production, distribution and transport, education and businesses. All are likely to be affected by employee illness, travel restrictions and other potentially disruptive counter measures. The federal, provincial and municipal emergency response plans will focus on the maintenance of essential services.

THE RESPONSE TO PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan

Canada was one of the first countries to have a pandemic influenza plan in place. It sets out specific measures and actions required from health and other government departments and organizations at national, provincial and local levels to support an effective response to pandemic influenza.

The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan was developed in accordance with international recommendations issued by the *World Health Organization* and adapted to meet national needs. The goal is to minimize the impact of pandemic influenza on the Canadian population.

An integrated international, national and local response

The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan provides the overall framework for a Canada-wide response and covers the national health response. Plans have been developed at the provincial and local level. Health regions, including the Calgary Health Region, are responsible for developing their own contingency plans and ensuring local needs are met while remaining integrated in the national and international response.

Calgary Health Region

In Alberta, the health regions will use their own coordinated contingency plans to provide health services, public health arrangements and information at the local level, which includes:

- promoting self care by individuals and families
- looking after patients in the community
- providing specialist care for those who need it
- promoting appropriate infection control measures with public and health care workers
- arranging the distribution of antivirals
- providing mass vaccination
- minimizing the disruption to other essential health-care services
- making plans to continue operations with depleted employee numbers
- making arrangements to have volunteers assist employees, where appropriate

WHAT DO I DO?

Preventing the spread of influenza

Influenza viruses pass from person to person by droplets when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. These droplets can land on the eyes, nose or mouth and cause infection. Influenza virus can also persist on hard surfaces for up to two days; simply touching a contaminated surface with your hand and then putting your hand up to your eyes, nose or mouth can transfer the virus to your body. Unlike regular influenza, there is currently no vaccine against pandemic influenza, so it is critical that we all take simple precautions to prevent the spread of the virus.

Washing your hands is the single most important way to prevent pandemic influenza. You should wash your hands for at least 15 seconds with soap and warm water or use an alcohol hand rub in the following situations:

Before:

- Handling or eating food or feeding others
- Brushing or flossing teeth
- Inserting or removing contact lenses
- After treating wounds or cuts
- Touching your eyes, nose or mouth in any way

After:

- Having any contact with a person who has influenza or with his/her immediate environment
- Going to the toilet or changing a diaper
- Blowing your nose or wiping a child's nose
- Coughing or sneezing
- Handling garbage

Washing your hands is the single most important way to prevent pandemic influenza

Other prevention measures include:

- Covering your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, preferably with a tissue
- Throwing away tissues after wiping your nose, sneezing or coughing
- Avoiding crowds during pandemic influenza
- Keeping personal items separate if a household member has influenza
- Not sharing personal items or drinks
- Maintaining good health, including drinking plenty of water; not smoking, exercising regularly and eating nutritious meals

WHAT TO EXPECT?

If you or a member of your family is infected

If you suspect you or a member of your family is sick, you should

- stay home, treat early symptoms from home
- follow the advice in the influenza self-care guide “It’s in your hands”, www.health.gov.ab.ca/influenza/self_care.html
- take medicines to relieve symptoms
- drink plenty of fluids
- contact Calgary Health Link at 943.LINK (5465) or 1.866.408 LINK (5465) toll free for advice

Calling Health Link is an important first step. Health Link professionals will be able to provide information over the phone to help you decide if you need to seek care. If you are able to treat your symptoms at home, this will help prevent the spread of infection to others.

If you do need medical care, Health Link employees will tell you whether you should try to see your family doctor or visit a Calgary Health Region assessment centre; it is possible your family doctor or regular clinic will be closed. You should not go to an Emergency Department if local assessment centres are set up in the community.

Access to health care facilities

Pandemic influenza planning assumes the majority of people with influenza will care for themselves.

The Calgary Health Region will need to use additional facilities to care for patients with severe pandemic influenza. Only essential services and acute care will be provided in hospitals. Additional areas will be developed to care for patients requiring intensive care.

Triage/assessment centres will be established in Calgary and rural areas, where people can go to be assessed and receive short term interventions, such as hydration. The Calgary Health Region will provide details about these centres, including location, hours and access, through the media and our website at www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/pandemic. The public will be asked to use these facilities instead of coming to Emergency Departments.

We will also support long-term care institutions to care for their patients with influenza.

Visitors to Calgary Health Region facilities, including hospitals and long-term care facilities will be asked to follow infection prevention and control measures, such as wearing masks. Watch for communication from the Calgary Health Region about any changes to visiting hours or procedures. If you are not feeling well, you will be asked not to visit any health care facilities.

Vaccines and antivirals

As already noted, there is currently no vaccine ready to protect against pandemic influenza. Medicines called antivirals may be used to treat pandemic influenza. However, until the pandemic virus is circulating, we won't know how well the antivirals will work.

When a vaccine is developed, the aim will be to immunize the entire population as quickly as possible, as vaccine supplies increase. Until then, vaccines will be given to those people who are helping others in the community, including health care workers most at risk due to their contact with patients and essential services workers.

Antiviral drugs, if they are proven to be effective to treat pandemic influenza, will be given to people hospitalized for influenza, health care workers and emergency services workers with symptoms and other at-risk groups.

Ethical decision making

In the event of pandemic influenza, the principles guiding decision making about treatment and care will change. Decisions will be made on the basis of what will benefit society as a whole, rather than the needs of individuals. Minimizing the spread of disease and death will be the priority. Normal triage procedures and resource allocations will likely be altered.

LEARN MORE ABOUT PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

Calgary Health Region

www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/pandemic

Alberta Health and Wellness

www.health.gov.ab.ca/public/pandemic/pandemicplan.html

www.health.gov.ab.ca/influenza/self_care.html

Canadian Public Health Agency

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/influenza

World Health Organization

www.who.int

You can also call Calgary Health Link at 403.943.LINK (5465) or 1.866.408.LINK (5465) toll free.

In a pandemic, information and advice on how best to protect individual citizens and their families will be made widely available through information leaflets, websites and the media. Such advice will include where and how to seek medical assistance.

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