Public Health
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publique du Canada

YOU CAN PLAY A ROLE IN PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

At one time or another, you may have heard your mother say "cover your mouth when you cough" and "remember to wash your hands."

Well, as some would say, "Mom is always right." And her sage words may not only keep you healthy during flu season each year, they can also help stop the spread of an influenza pandemic.

Human influenza, or the flu, is a respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus. This virus spreads through droplets that have been coughed or sneezed into the air by someone who has the flu. Different strains of this virus regularly circulate in our communities, making people sick. However, you may be able to avoid getting sick if you have antibodies to fight off the virus strain you're exposed to. Influenza immunization, or the "flu shot," is the best way to avoid getting sick because it stimulates the body to produce antibodies against the influenza virus.

From time to time, an influenza strain changes into a new strain. We may have little or no immunity to the new strain. If this new strain of influenza virus has the ability to spread easily from person to person, many people around the world could become ill and possibly die. This is referred to as an influenza pandemic.

At this time, there is no influenza pandemic anywhere in the world. But knowing how to protect yourself from getting influenza is important both before and during a pandemic. By following good hand and respiratory hygiene practices, you can reduce the risk of catching or spreading influenza both during the regular flu season and in a pandemic.

- Wash your hands regularly with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds, especially before and after eating, after going to the bathroom, after coughing and sneezing, and after touching surfaces that may have been contaminated.

- Sneeze and cough into a tissue or your sleeve to avoid spreading the virus through air droplets or contaminating your hands with the virus.

- Throw away used tissues promptly.

- Frequently clean and disinfect household surfaces such as door knobs, light switches and countertops that may have been contaminated.

- Encourage all members of your household, especially children, to follow these practices.

- If you do get the flu, stay at home and rest until you are feeling better.

Sounds pretty simple, right? Because it is. As Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. David Butler-Jones, has stated: "Reinforcing basic hand-washing is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of disease."

By remembering these simple hygiene practices, you can reduce your chances of getting the virus, giving the virus and contributing to the spread of the virus. And remember, even people who are not showing symptoms can still spread the virus.

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