

Self Care 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 can I care for myself during a flu pandemic?

During a flu pandemic, many people will be sick and it may be difficult to get medical care. For this reason, it is very important to be prepared to take care of yourself and others at home as much as possible.

There are antiviral drugs that can be prescribed by a doctor to treat the flu. During a pandemic, however, these antivirals are going to be in very short supply and will likely only be available for those people who are most likely to get very sick or die from the flu, or for those persons who work in essential services such as health care, fire fighters, police, etc.

Because you may need to be home for a time during the pandemic, it is a good idea to stock up on some basic supplies, such as food and water, for several days. Make sure you have several days supply of your regular medications on hand, and have a list of phone numbers for family, friends, neighbours, and your doctor.

Much of the time, home treatment and self care can relieve most symptoms and reduce the risk for further problems. If you get the flu, ways to monitor and improve your health at home include:

- **Stay home if you are sick.** This will ensure that you get the rest you need and that you don't spread the virus to others.
- **Drink lots of fluids.** This includes water, real juice, milk and herbal teas. It is best to have drinks without caffeine, because caffeine actually makes you lose fluid from your body.
- **Take basic pain/fever relievers.** Examples are acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen. *Acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) should NOT be given to children or teenagers.*
- **Use a hot water bottle or heating pad.** Applying heat carefully, for short periods of time, can help reduce muscle pain. Check the skin often when using a heating pad because the pad can cause burns and blisters.
- **Take cough medicine.** This helps especially if you have a dry cough.
- **Get lots of rest.**

- **Take a warm bath with Epsom salts.**
- **Gargle with a glass of warm water and/or suck on sugarless hard candy or lozenges.** They can ease your sore throat.
- **Use saline drops or spray or decongestants.** These help soothe or clear a stuffed nose.
- **Avoid alcohol and tobacco.** Smoking especially irritates damaged airways.
- **Avoid sharing anything that may carry germs** such as towels, lipstick, cigarettes, drinks, or toys.
- **Wash your hands often.** Use soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds each time, or alcohol-based hand cleaners if your hands do not look dirty. This will help you avoid spreading the flu to others.
- **Ask your pharmacist for advice if you buy over-the-counter medicine.** Let the pharmacist know if you have any chronic medical problems.
- **Call someone to help you until you are feeling better.** This is especially important if you are alone, are a single parent or are responsible for the care of someone who is frail or disabled.

For seasonal flu, most healthy people feel better in about five to seven days. However, general tiredness and cough can last much longer, up to two to three weeks. For pandemic flu, it is not known if it will take longer to get better, or not.

When should I see a doctor?

If you do not start to feel better in a few days or your symptoms get worse, you should call the BC NurseLine or seek medical care right away. Always call your doctor and let him/her know about your symptoms before visiting, so that you don't infect other people at the office. Also, call your doctor right away if you get sick and have heart or lung disease, any other chronic health problems that require regular medical attention, if you are elderly or frail, or if you have an illness or are on treatments that affect your immune system. Your doctor may prescribe antiviral medication if he or she thinks it is necessary. Antibiotics may be necessary to treat secondary infections such as bacterial pneumonia.

If special clinics for people with the flu or flu-like symptoms have been set up, your doctor's office might ask you to go there instead.

In children, seek medical care right away if you notice any of the following:

- Fast or troubled breathing;
- Bluish or dark coloured lips or skin color;
- Drowsiness to the point that you cannot wake your child up;
- Severe crankiness, not wanting to be held;

- Not drinking enough fluids and/or not going to the bathroom (peeing) regularly (about every 6 hours when awake); or
- Symptoms improve and then suddenly become worse.

In adults, seek medical care right away if you have any of the following:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath;
- Pain or pressure in the chest or stomach;
- Confusion or disorientation;
- Coughing up bloody sputum;
- Severe vomiting or vomiting that does not go away; or
- Symptoms improve and then suddenly become worse.

For more information

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

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

[#94b Staying Healthy 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