
Influenza Self-Care

PREVENTION AND CARE FOR YOURSELF
AND OTHERS WITH INFLUENZA



HASTINGS COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES

Flu season strikes North America each fall and winter, normally between November and April.

This booklet provides important information about influenza (flu). It shows how you can prevent catching the flu and keep it from spreading.

Whether facing a regular flu season or a pandemic flu strain like H1N1, by taking steps as individuals we can better protect ourselves, our families, and those around us.

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Influenza

What is Influenza?

Influenza (flu) is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by a virus. As with other viral illnesses, antibiotics do not work against a flu virus. Various strains of influenza virus circulate throughout the world each year.

An influenza infection lowers the body's ability to fight other infections. This can lead to pneumonia or bronchitis. Influenza can also make other health conditions such as diabetes, lung disease, heart disease, kidney disease and cancer worse.

Most healthy people are able to recover from the illness without severe complications. However, for some people influenza can be very serious, and can lead to other major health problems and even death.

Seasonal Flu Virus vs. Pandemic Flu Virus

During a person's lifetime, an individual may be infected by different strains of influenza many times. Even though these seasonal flu viruses can change each year, most people will continue to have some immunity, or protection, particularly if they are immunized with a vaccine every year.

A pandemic influenza is different than the seasonal flu. It is a new strain, like the H1N1 flu virus, that spreads quickly among people worldwide. This happens because people have no pre-existing immunity against this new strain.

A pandemic influenza may be mild, moderate or severe. Its symptoms are similar to seasonal flu. An influenza pandemic does not necessarily cause more severe illness than seasonal influenza.

What you Can do

Seasonal flu vaccines most likely won't protect against pandemic flu viruses like H1N1. To best protect yourself, you are encouraged to have a seasonal flu shot and the pandemic virus vaccination (when the pandemic vaccine is fully tested and becomes available).

Flu Virus Symptoms

- Sudden fever of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher.
- Headache.
- Dry cough.
- Muscle aches especially in the lower back and legs.
- Extreme weakness and exhaustion.

Other symptoms can include:

- Chills.
- Loss of appetite.
- Sore throat.
- Runny or stuffy nose.

Note:

- Individuals younger than five years of age or those 65 years of age and older may not have a fever.
- Some nausea, vomiting and diarrhea have been reported in some people with the H1N1 pandemic influenza.
- Fever usually goes down and the person starts to feel better in three to five days. However, exhaustion and cough can continue for several weeks.

How the Flu Virus Spreads

Most people catch the flu when they come in contact with moisture droplets that contain the virus. For example, when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or touches a surface without washing his or her hands, the virus can be passed on to others.

Airborne droplets can enter the body through the eyes, nose or mouth. The virus, contained in droplets, can travel one to two metres in the air.

People develop symptoms of influenza from one to three days after becoming infected. They are contagious from the day before they have the first symptoms until five days after the symptoms start.

What you Can do:

When you cough or sneeze, use your elbow or shoulder. Don't use your hands. Sneezing into a tissue is OK. But dispose of the tissue immediately and carefully. You should then wash your hands.

Where the Virus Lives

The virus can live on hard surfaces for up to 48 hours. So regular cleaning with a disinfectant is a good practice. The virus can live on cloth, tissue and paper between eight and 12 hours. And it can live on your hands for five minutes.

At work the virus can live on: meeting tables, instruments, doorknobs, keyboards, chairs, coffee cups, towels, reports, as well as backs of hands, faces and arms.

What you Can do

Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth after shaking hands or touching hard surfaces like meeting tables and door handles or other surfaces where influenza and other viruses may live.

Wash Your Hands Often

The best way to prevent the spread of any disease, including the flu, is to wash your hands often.

If you work in a common area:

Employees who work with the public, or others like IT workers who visit many different work areas, need to constantly wash their hands. If you share common work areas and equipment (e.g. phones, computers, desks) make sure as an individual you wipe down and sanitize shared equipment when taking over the workspace. If you need disinfectant materials for your workstations, contact your supervisor.

You need to take the same precaution if you use a vehicle that is shared by others. Wipe down steering wheels, door handles and other areas that are commonly touched.

Washing Hands With Soap and Water

- Use regular soap (liquid or bar soap). Antibacterial soap is not necessary.
- Wet hands with warm, running water and lather well.
- Rub the hands together for about the amount of time it would take to say the alphabet (about 15 to 20 seconds).
- Scrub all over, including the backs of the hands, the wrists, between the fingers and under the fingernails.
- Rinse under running water (for about 10 seconds).
- Dry with a clean or disposable towel.
- If using a public restroom, use a disposable towel to turn off the faucet to avoid further contact with the tap. Use the towel to open the exit door. Put the towel into a proper bin or wastebasket.

Washing Hands With Alcohol Hand Sanitizers (gels, liquids and foams)

- When soap and water are not available, hand sanitizers are an excellent choice to use.
- Use only alcohol-based hand sanitizers. They should contain at least 60 per cent alcohol.
- Put some of the hand sanitizer on the palm of your hand and rub your hands together.
- Cover all surfaces, including fingers and wrists, and rub until dry (about 15 to 25 seconds).
- Hand sanitizers don't work if hands are soiled. When hands are soiled, wash with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use a towelette that contains detergent. Then use the hand sanitizer.
- Young children need help when using hand sanitizers. This is to make sure that their hands are dry before they touch anything or put their hands in their mouths

Wash Your Hands Before:

You touch food or feed others

Brushing or flossing your teeth

You touch contact lenses

Touching an open wound

Wash Your Hands After:

Using the toilet

Blowing your nose

Coughing or sneezing

Being near a sick person

Changing a diaper

Touching an open wound

Handling garbage

Other Ways to Prevent the Spread of Influenza

Avoid crowds during the flu season

Use stairs instead of crowded elevators

Avoid shaking hands, kissing or hugging people

Pay your bills at an ATM, online or over the phone

Visit those who have the flu only if necessary, and stand more than three feet away from them

Keep personal items separate if a household member has influenza

Clean surfaces often with a detergent cleanser

Do not share personal items or drinks

Stay Well

Get the annual seasonal flu shot

Get the pandemic influenza vaccine when it's available

Get lots of sleep

Drink plenty of water

Exercise regularly

Don't smoke

Take a multivitamin daily, if you are an older adult

Decrease stress and stay optimistic

What About Pets?

Most family pets are not at risk for getting or passing on influenza. Pigs, birds and horses are at risk for getting influenza. If you have these animals as pets on a farm, take special care to wash your hands after contact with them.

Managing Influenza in Adults

General self-care measures

- Rest.
- Avoid contact with others while contagious (for at least five days) if possible.
- Drink extra fluids.
- Gargle with warm salt water, e.g. mix together:
 - One teaspoon (5 ml) of salt.
 - One teaspoon (5 ml) of baking soda.
 - Two cups (500 ml) of water.
- Use throat lozenges.
- Use saline nose drops or sprays.
- Use a humidifier with the following conditions:
 - Failure to maintain your humidifier can result in additional health problems.
 - Always follow the manufacturer’s directions for the use and proper care of your humidifier.
- Don’t smoke. Avoid second-hand smoke.
- Talk to others about concerns and ask for help if needed. Keeping in touch by phone or email can help with feelings of loneliness when sick.

Note: If the above suggestions do not work, review the guidelines for over-the-counter (non-prescription) medications provided in this booklet.

Over-the-Counter Medications

General Guidelines

Before using a product you should know:

- How to use it (e.g. how much to use and how often).
- How long to use it.
- The possible side-effects.
- When to seek medical attention.

Note: Speak with a health care provider if you are unsure about any of these points.

- Follow the instructions on the label. Pay particular attention to when the medication should not be used.
- To prevent adverse reactions or taking extra medication that is not required, use an over-the counter product that contains the least number of active ingredients required to treat your symptoms.
- Try “regular strength” products before “extra strength” and only take the dose recommended.
- If you are taking more than one medication at a time, check the labels to avoid taking the same ingredient twice.
- Check the expiry date on medications in your home. Take outdated medications to a pharmacy for disposal.
- Keep all medications out of the reach of children.

Over-the-Counter Medications (Cont.)

For muscle pain and fever

Use acetaminophen (may be the best choice for some people) or ibuprofen. There are cautions with the use of both of these medications. Speak with a pharmacist or health care provider if you have any questions.

Note: acetaminophen, when taken in high doses or with other medication or alcohol, may be dangerous to your health. Ibuprofen may irritate the stomach and cause fluid (water) retention.

For a cough

You may wish to try a medication with dextromethorphan (DM) for a dry cough that prevents you from sleeping or causes chest discomfort.

For a stuffy nose

- Try saline nose drops or sprays first.
- Nose drops or sprays act quickly and may cause fewer side-effects than medications taken by mouth
- They should only be used for two or three days because with longer use, nose stuffiness (congestion) can actually get worse.
- Try a decongestant if saline nose drops or sprays don't work.
- Decongestants may cause side-effects like rapid heartbeat and sleeping problems and should not be used in some cases.
- Speak with a pharmacist or health care provider and always read the label carefully before using a decongestant product.

Over-the-Counter Medications (Cont.)

For a sore throat

If saltwater gargles haven't worked, you may wish to try lozenges or throat sprays. Products with dyclonine will numb the throat while other products have a soothing effect.

Complementary medicines

Some people may wish to try complementary therapies such as herbal and homeopathic products.

It is important to find out as much as possible about the product you are thinking of taking, as some complementary products should not be used in certain situations.

Consult with your pharmacist or health care provider before taking these products

Prescription Medications

Antiviral medication

- Can decrease the length and severity of the illness.
- Must be started within 48 hours after the first symptoms appear in order to work.
- May be prescribed by physicians for people with severe illness or for those at risk of developing severe illness.

Antibiotic medication

Not usually prescribed for influenza but your doctor may prescribe these medications for complications such as pneumonia.

When to seek medical care

Seek medical care if you or people in your care:

- Have heart or lung disease.
- Have any other chronic condition that requires regular medical attention.
- Are frail.
- Have a chronic illness.
- Are on treatments that weaken the immune system.

Seek Emergency Medical Care if You, or Someone in Your Care, Have Any of the Following Symptoms:

- Shortness of breath while resting or doing very little.
- Difficult or painful breathing.
- Coughing up bloody sputum (a mixture of saliva and mucus).
- Increased wheezing.
- Chest pain.
- Fever for three or four days without improvement.
- Feeling better, then suddenly having a high fever or becoming ill again.
- Extreme drowsiness and difficulty awakening.
- Disorientation or confusion.
- Severe earache.
- Sudden inability to function in a normally independent, elderly person.
- Constant vomiting or diarrhea, especially in an elderly person or a young child.

Managing Influenza in Children

Symptoms to look for in children

Influenza is more severe in children younger than five years of age and especially for those younger than two years of age. Children with influenza may have the same symptoms as adults, but there are some differences in babies and toddlers.

Some differences:

A fever may be the only symptom of influenza in babies.

Some babies may not be able to drink fluids or breastfeed.

Seizures or stiff neck may appear in some babies.

Young children may also have headache, vomiting, irritability and sensitive eyes.

Toddlers and babies usually have higher temperatures, often over 39.5°C (103.1°F).

About half of the children three years of age or younger have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach pain.

Symptoms to look for in children (Cont.)

Influenza viruses may cause croup, pneumonia or bronchitis in young children.

Ear infections and red, sore eyes are more frequent in young children. Sore muscles are also common.

Note: toddlers and babies are not able to tell people they have sore muscles or a headache. they may be irritable and eat poorly. they sometimes have a hoarse cry and a barking cough.

Children older than five years of age and adolescents usually have the same symptoms as adults.

How to Care For a Child With Influenza

For fever and muscle aches

- Use acetaminophen.
- Ibuprofen is another option, but it should not be used for babies younger than six months of age.
- Take the child's temperature first.
- Do not wake the child to give the medication.

Note: Children younger than 18 years of age should not take acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) or any products containing ASA. Combined with influenza, ASA may cause Reye's syndrome, a very serious condition affecting the nervous system and liver.

How to Care For a Child With Influenza (Cont.)

- Dress the child in lightweight clothing and keep room temperature at 20°C (68°F).
- Offer water or juice or breastfeed infants often while the child is awake.
- Do not use cool baths or alcohol rubs.
- Encourage the child to rest or involve them in quiet activities for approximately five days.
- Try saline nose drops for stuffy nose or cough.
- Elevate the head of the bed; babies may be more comfortable in a car seat or a baby swing.
- Use a humidifier with the following conditions:
 - Failure to maintain your humidifier can result in additional health problems.
 - Always follow the manufacturer’s directions for the use and proper care of your humidifier.

Over-the-Counter Medication

Children Younger Than Six Years of Age

- Health Canada recommends that over-the-counter cough and cold medications should not be used in children younger than six years of age.
- These products have not been shown to reduce symptoms in children.
- There have been reports of overdose, misuse and rare side-effects.
- Some of the serious side-effects reported include such symptoms as convulsions, increased heart rate, decreased level of awareness, unusual heart rhythms and hallucinations.
- Do not use VapoRub-type products on children younger than two years of age.

Children six years of age and older:

- Do not give children medications labelled only for use in adults and/or those that do not include instructions for children.
- Over-the-counter medications should only be considered if other measures have not worked.

Over-the-Counter Medication Children Younger Than Six Years of Age (Cont.)

- Talk to your pharmacist or health care provider before using over-the-counter medications. They will help you to decide:
 - If an over-the-counter medication will lessen your child's symptoms
 - If the medication is safe for your child to take
- When using over-the-counter medications to treat children older than six years of age talk with your pharmacist or health care provider about:
 - How long the medication should be taken
 - The dosage
 - The possible side-effects
- Follow all the instructions carefully including the dosing and length-of-use directions.
- Use the medication-dosing device, if one is included with the product, to ensure accurate dosing.
- Do not give more than one kind of cough or cold medication to children

When to Seek Medical Care For a Child

Almost all children with influenza have fever. So whether or not a child has a fever is not helpful as a sign of how severe their illness is. Seek medical care if a child is ill and has any of the following conditions:

- Is younger than six months old.
- Has heart or lung disease or any chronic illness requiring regular medical care.
- Has a disease or is receiving treatments that weaken the immune system.
- Takes ASA regularly for a medical condition.
- Has a change in breathing (such as breathing fast) or difficulty breathing.
- Is very listless and loses interest in playing, watching TV, eating or drinking.
- Is very irritable and cries a lot.
- Urinates less than usual, for example:
 - Has a dry diaper for more than three hours if younger than six months of age.
 - Has a dry diaper for longer than six hours if six to 23 months of age.
 - Goes to the bathroom less often than every six hours while awake, if two years of age or older.
- Looks very ill and the caregiver is worried.

When to Take a Child to the Emergency Room

Call 9-1-1 or go to a hospital emergency room right away if the child

- Has severe trouble breathing and a stuffy nose does not cause it.
- Has blue lips or hands, suddenly becomes pale, or has cold legs up to their knees.
- Is very tired or unable to move.
- Is sleepy and doesn't respond when you try to get them up.
- Shows signs of pain, such as headache or stiff neck, especially if they also have fever, are listless and their eyes are sensitive to light.
- Seems confused.
- Has a seizure.

For More Information:

Public Health Agency of Canada
Visit: fightflu.ca

Hastings-Prince Edward Counties Health Unit
Visit: hpechu.on.ca

Ontario Ministry of Health
Visit: health.gov.on.ca

Hastings County Website
Visit: hastingscounty.com

Telehealth Ontario
1-866-797-0000
TTY: 1-866-797-0007

Have a plan.

Have a 72-hour emergency kit.

If a severe flu outbreak occurs, you and your family might be confined to your home. What would you need? Do you have a plan if the caregiver(s) was hospitalized? If you live alone, what would you need at home if you were too ill to leave?

Be prepared by:

Having non-perishable food items, such as canned or frozen soups, juices, fruits, vegetables, canned fish, crackers and peanut butter.

Having prescription medications (a supply of two to three months if possible).

Having medication and a thermometer handy in case of fever.

Having alcohol-based cleaning wipes and hand sanitizers.

Having personal hygiene products such as soap, hand sanitizers, shampoo and toilet paper.

Having household cleaning supplies, such as bleach or disinfectant, dishwashing soap and paper towels.

Having emergency phone numbers and self-care instructions where everyone in the household can find them.

Having arrangements for schoolwork to be done at home.

Having books and games at home for children to play with.

Having a back-up caregiver for loved ones.

The 'Four Cs' to Prevention

Awareness is critical in preventing the spread of the flu virus. Remembering the “four Cs” below will help greatly in protecting yourself, your family, co-workers and your community.

CLEAN. Wash your hands frequently using soap and water, especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose. When soap and water are not available, hand sanitizers are an excellent choice. But, if your hands are visibly dirty, the hand sanitizer will not work.

COVER. When you cough or sneeze, use your elbow or shoulder. Don't use your hands. Sneezing into a tissue is OK. But dispose of the tissue immediately and carefully. And then wash your hands.

CAREFUL. Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth after shaking hands or touching hard surfaces like meeting tables and door handles where influenza and other viruses may live.

CONTAIN. If sick, stay home from work and avoid public places.

