

# PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS

*The following information has been adapted from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's (MOHLTC) pandemic resources for workplaces website:*

[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan\\_flu/employ/resources.html](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan_flu/employ/resources.html)

## INFLUENZA

### **Q: What is influenza? How is it spread?**

**A:** Influenza, more commonly known as the flu, is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus. It is spread directly from person to person by droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. It is also spread indirectly from the hands and objects freshly soiled with discharges of the nose and throat of an infected person to another person.

### **Q: Can people spread influenza even if they do not appear to be sick?**

**A:** Yes. People may develop symptoms from 1-3 days after becoming infected with the influenza virus. People can be infectious from 24 hours before they have the first symptoms and up to 5 days after the onset of the illness. The transmission of a pandemic influenza will probably be the same as annual (seasonal) influenza.

### **Q: What are the symptoms of influenza and when should I stay home?**

**A: Stay home** if you have the following symptoms of influenza:

- Fever
- New cough or shortness of breath
- Runny nose
- Diarrhea/vomiting (children)

This helps to prevent the spread of infection and reduces risk to others. The MOHLTC Pandemic Planning Checklist for Employers lists the importance of implementing appropriate infection control and healthy workplace policies and specifically highlights the importance of handwashing, cough etiquette, staying home when ill, etc.

[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan\\_flu/employ/check.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan_flu/employ/check.pdf)

# PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS

**Q: What is the difference between a cold and influenza?**

**A:**

| Symptom                    | Cold                        | Flu  |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Fever                      | Rare                        | Usually high fever (102°F/39°C--104°F/40°C), sudden on set, lasts 3-4 days |
| Headache                   | Rare                        | Usual, can be severe   |
| Aches and pains            | Sometimes, mild             | Usual, often severe  |
| Fatigue & weakness         | Sometimes, mild             | Usual, severe, may last 2-3 weeks or more                                  |
| Extreme fatigue            | Unusual                     | Usual early onset, can be severe   |
| Runny, stuffy nose         | Common                      | Common   |
| Sneezing                   | Common                      | Sometimes  |
| Sore throat                | Common                      | Common   |
| Chest discomfort, coughing | Sometimes, mild to moderate | Can become severe  |
| Complications              | Unusual                     | Pneumonia, respiratory failure. Can be life threatening                    |

**Q. What is the difference between seasonal and pandemic influenza?**

**A:** See the chart below for a comparison of seasonal and pandemic influenza.

| SEASONAL INFLUENZA  | PANDEMIC INFLUENZA  |
|---|---|
| Severe in the very old and the very young                     | May be severe in all age groups                               |
| Seasonal - occurs in the winter months in Canada              | Can occur at any time of the year                             |
| Normal flu mortality (deaths) - 4,000 to 8,000 year in Canada | Higher levels of mortality (deaths)                           |
| Illness usually lasts 1 to 2 weeks                            | Patients may be sicker for a longer period of time            |
| Usually just one wave of illness per season                   | There will be more than one wave of illness in each community |

# PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS

| SEASONAL INFLUENZA  | PANDEMIC INFLUENZA  |
|---|---|
| Vaccine is available before each season based on common circulating strain around the world | Vaccine cannot be developed until a novel pandemic influenza strain is identified by the World Health Organization. Vaccine may not be available for four to six months, and supply will be limited |
| Circulates on a seasonal basis  | Spreads rapidly throughout the world  |
| Viruses change slightly throughout the season   | New circulating virus; population has little or no immunity   |

**Q: How does an influenza pandemic start?**

**A:** The viruses that cause influenza are constantly changing. A pandemic starts when a new strain of influenza virus emerges that is different from common strains of influenza. Because people have no immunity to the new virus, it can spread quickly and infect hundreds of thousands of people. Pandemic influenza strains often develop when an animal or bird virus mixes with a human virus to form a new virus.

**Q: What is avian influenza?**

**A:** Avian influenza refers to a strain of influenza viruses that primarily affect birds. The vast majority of avian influenza viruses do not infect humans. However, some of these viruses can infect humans and potentially cause significant illness. There are global surveillance systems monitoring bird influenza viruses. The Canadian associations responsible for surveillance are: Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre (CCWHC) and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).

See surveillance maps indicating the status of avian influenza in humans, birds and animals and any pertinent travel advice:

[http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian\\_influenza/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/index.html)

**Q: Can mosquitoes transmit avian influenza from birds to people like West Nile?**

**A:** No, there is no evidence that the influenza virus can be transmitted by mosquitoes.

# **PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS**

**Q: Can you get avian influenza from eating chicken or other poultry?**

**A:** No, if the meat is fully cooked. Cooking kills flu viruses in poultry, meat, and eggs. The bird flu virus can survive on raw meat from infected poultry. Proper hygiene which includes hand washing and the disinfecting of all surfaces that come in contact with poultry and raw eggs is essential.

## **TRAVEL**

**Q: What measures have been taken to secure Canadian borders from the threat of avian and/or pandemic influenza?**

**A:** The Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) assess people and goods coming to Canada to determine if they pose a threat to the health or safety of the country. Canada does not permit imported birds or bird products from countries or zones that are not recognized as free of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Border services with the assistance of PHAC, screen travellers for signs of illness and make referrals if necessary to quarantine officers.

See the Canadian Inspection Agency link regarding importing products:  
<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/anima/heasan/disemala/avflu/bacdoc/appdeme.pdf>

**Q: Are there any precautions necessary for travellers?**

**A:** Employees travelling to countries that are not recognized as free of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) should avoid poultry farms and live bird markets. See the World Health Organization (WHO) advice to travellers  
[http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian\\_influenza/travel2005\\_11\\_3/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/travel2005_11_3/en/index.html)

See the WHO maps of all the affected countries related to their current avian influenza status:  
<http://gamapserver.who.int/mapLibrary/app/searchResults.aspx>

# PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS

## INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL MEASURES

**Q: How can I reduce the risk to myself, my family and my co-workers from an influenza pandemic?**

**A:** If a flu pandemic spreads to Ontario, you can reduce your risk by doing the same things you do to protect yourself and your family from ordinary flu and other infections:

- **Get your flu shot** every year
- When you cough or sneeze, **cover your mouth and nose** with a tissue or your upper sleeve. Do not use your hand. Put your tissue in a wastebasket, then wash your hands. Teach and reinforce this healthy habit with your family and colleagues. This is commonly referred to as “cough or respiratory etiquette”
- **Clean your hands thoroughly and often** by: washing your hands at a sink with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand rub
  - Clean your hands:
    - Before preparing, handling or eating food
    - Before and after caring for the sick or performing first aid
    - After coughing, sneezing, blowing your nose, using facial tissue
    - After using the washroom
    - After touching any body fluids
    - After changing diapers
    - After shaking hands and touching shared surfaces or objects
    - After handling animals, birds or pets
    - Whenever hands are dirty
- **Stay home when you are sick**
- **Increase the frequency of cleaning** in your home, facility or faith community
- **Avoid non-essential travel and large crowds** when there are known pandemic influenza cases in your community
- **Follow any instructions given by public health authorities**

**Q: How does covering my cough or sneeze prevent the spread of germs to my family, co-workers and others?**

**A:** Influenza is spread directly from person to person by droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks or indirectly by touching hands and objects soiled with discharges of the nose and throat.

## PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS

| Transmission of Influenza  | Prevention of Influenza   |
|--|---|
| Droplets can travel 1 to 2 metres in the air (droplets can enter through the eyes, nose, or mouth) | Cover nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing  |
| Droplets can live on hard surfaces for 1-2 days  | Clean the environment frequently, especially “high-touch” surfaces and shared workspaces (where hands touch often such as telephones, doorknobs, railings, light switches, etc) |
| Droplets can live on facial tissue for 8-12 hours  | Dispose of used tissue after one use. Do not re-use. Do not use handkerchiefs   |
| Droplets can survive on hands for 5 minutes  | Wash your hands frequently. Avoid touching your nose, eyes or mouth with unwashed hands   |

**Q: What is hand hygiene?**

**A:** Hand hygiene includes hand washing at a sink with soap and water and/or the use of alcohol-based hand rubs. Practising good hand hygiene is the single most important thing we can all do to prevent the transmission of infection, including influenza.

**Q: What is the best way to wash my hands?**

**A:** The 5 steps of hand washing are:

**Wet, Soap, Scrub, Rinse, Dry** (and turn off the taps with a paper towel)

See the Peel Public Health website for downloadable, printable hand hygiene posters geared for various audiences

<http://www.peelregion.ca/health/pandemic/educ-materials.htm#hand>

**Q: What else should I know about hand washing?**

**A: Pump soap (liquid) is preferred to bar soap** in public settings because bar soap can harbour micro-organisms especially with multiple users. Bar soap is acceptable for personal use.

**Antibacterial soap is not recommended** except in some healthcare settings in the workplace. (Community and Hospital Infection Control Association-Canada, 2005)(CHICA-Canada). There is no evidence it will prevent infection in non

# PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS

health-care settings and it can potentially lead to the development of resistant micro-organisms. See CHICA-Canada's website:  
[http://www.chica.org/links\\_position.html](http://www.chica.org/links_position.html)

**The use of paper towels is the preferred way to dry hands** (as opposed to air dryers wherever possible). The use of linen/cloth roller type dispensers is discouraged.

**Do not refill containers of soap from larger bottles** in public settings. Soap dispensers should be single use only because refilling can result in contamination of the container. Cleaning and refilling small containers is also not recommended due to the potential for contamination.

**Wash your hands for at least 15 seconds.** Choose a song to sing, such as "Happy Birthday" to help you wash your hands long enough to be effective in removing micro-organisms

**Q: How does alcohol based hand rub work?**

**A:** Using products such as liquids, gels, foams or lotions containing **60-90%** alcohol kills the germs on hands when they are not visibly soiled. There must be enough product to **rub all surfaces of the hands** with particular attention to the finger tips until dry. This will take about **15 seconds**.

**Q: What special environmental cleaning procedures should my workplace use in order to prevent the spread of pandemic influenza in our facility?**

**A:** During a pandemic, use the same cleaning products as normal to keep your facility free from germs and dirt. Normal household cleaners are adequate. Follow manufacturer's directions for dilutions and use. However, you will need to increase the frequency of cleaning during pandemic influenza, especially the "high-touch surfaces".

Some suggested procedures to be followed at all times are:

- Use clean water, detergent and a strong mechanical action (like scrubbing) and allow for a sufficient amount of contact time
- Pay special attention to frequently touched and horizontal surfaces. These are important to clean because when we cough or sneeze, large droplets fall on these surfaces
- If using a disinfectant, always follow the manufacturer's directions  
[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan\\_flu/employ/guide.html](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan_flu/employ/guide.html)

# **PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS**

**Q: What is social distancing?**

**A:** Social distancing is a public health measure which includes maintaining a distance of more than 1 metre or 3 feet between people at all times and the avoidance of crowds.

|                                |
|--------------------------------|
| <b>VACCINES AND ANTIVIRALS</b> |
|--------------------------------|

**Q: Why do I need a flu shot every year?**

**A:** Each year, the annual flu vaccine is made of the current circulating strains of influenza virus found throughout the world. The vaccine is 70-90% effective but will only last for the current year. Get your seasonal influenza shot every year – the flu shot will not protect you from an Influenza Pandemic virus, but it will protect you from getting seasonal influenza, which could weaken your immune system or resistance to the Influenza Pandemic.

**Q: If there is a mismatch between the flu shot for the current year and the current circulating strains, should people still get the flu shot?**

**A:** The best way to prevent catching and spreading influenza is to get your flu shot. Even if the strains in the vaccine may not be an exact match to the major strains that may circulate in Ontario, you will still benefit. A cross-protection of up to 60% can be expected in healthy adults from influenza vaccination. This happens because there are common elements between the flu viruses for which the flu vaccine still provides protection.

**Q: Will a vaccine be available during a pandemic?**

**A:** A vaccine that gives good protection against a pandemic virus can only be developed after that virus strain appears. The Government of Canada has arrangements in place to develop a vaccine against a pandemic influenza virus as soon as such a virus emerges. It will take four to five months after the start of the pandemic to develop a vaccine.

**Q: When vaccine becomes available during pandemic where will I be able to receive it?**

# **PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS**

**A:** Peel Public Health will hold mass immunization clinics for the general public according to provincial priorities and directions.

**Q: What are antivirals?**

**A:** Antiviral drugs are medications that can be used during the flu season for the prevention and early treatment of the flu. They work by reducing the ability of the virus to reproduce. If taken shortly after getting sick, within 48 hours, they can reduce flu symptoms, shorten the length of the illness, and reduce serious complications. It is assumed that antiviral drugs will be effective in a pandemic. Antiviral drugs can only be obtained by prescription. They must be taken within 48 hours of the start of symptoms to be most effective (from the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (MOHLTC) fact sheet: Treating Pandemic Influenza with Vaccine and Antiviral Drugs).

[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pub/pan\\_flu/fact\\_sheet/panflu\\_antiviral\\_fs\\_02\\_20070205.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pub/pan_flu/fact_sheet/panflu_antiviral_fs_02_20070205.pdf)

**Q: Are there supplies of antiviral drugs?**

**A:** The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that antiviral drugs be stockpiled to treat 25 per cent of the population. The Ontario government is currently stockpiling enough antivirals to treat 25 per cent of Ontarians. The size of the stockpile is constantly reviewed to ensure it will be adequate.

## **PANDEMIC PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION**

**Q: Why should my workplace prepare for an influenza pandemic?**

**A:** Although pandemic planning is not easy, it is an important activity that all workplaces should undertake before an influenza pandemic arrives in Ontario. There are many good reasons why workplaces should start preparing for a pandemic now:

- Once an influenza pandemic virus arrives in Ontario, it will be difficult to begin planning;
- Workplaces will be better able to support the needs of their employees if they are well prepared in advance;
- Employees will turn to workplaces for support and answers during a pandemic. By planning in advance, employers will be better prepared to give their support;
- Workplaces must attempt to minimize the spread of pandemic influenza infection to protect the health of their employees
- Employers are responsible for hazard identification, risk assessment, hazard prevention and control by using a combination of prevention and control

## **PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS**

methods. It is also important for employers to ensure facility and environmental controls, standard operating procedures and safe work practices related to pandemic influenza.

See the Ministry of Labour website:  
<http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/>

See the Ontario Safety Association for Community and Health Care website:  
<http://www.osach.ca/new/SaftInfo/PanPlan.shtml>

**Q: Where can I go for more information to help me in developing an influenza pandemic plan for my workplace?**

**A:** See the following MOHLTC website for more information about influenza pandemic planning for workplaces:  
[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan\\_flu/employ/resources.html](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/emu/pan_flu/employ/resources.html)

Peel Public Health has several downloadable documents about pandemic influenza on the Peel Region website at:  
<http://www.peelregion.ca/health/pandemic/>

**Q: My workplace wants to disseminate information on influenza pandemic to employees. Has anyone created communication tools that can be used to educate the general public on influenza pandemic?**

**A:** The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care has created a fact sheet entitled "What you should know about a flu pandemic". It is available in 25 languages at [health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/pubhealth/flu/panflu/languages\\_mn.html](http://health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/pubhealth/flu/panflu/languages_mn.html)

Also visit the Peel Public Health website for additional local resources at [www.peelpandemic.ca](http://www.peelpandemic.ca)

**Q: Where can workplaces access accurate, up-to-date information during a pandemic?**

**A:** The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care has developed an information cycle to be used in a pandemic that serves the purpose of informing the healthcare system on significant events and timely recommendations.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, in conjunction with Emergency Management Ontario, is working to incorporate other sectors into the information cycle during an influenza pandemic, including workplaces.

## **PANDEMIC INFLUENZA FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR WORKPLACES AND EMPLOYERS**

The information cycle will include a standard time, teleconference number, agenda and disciplined procedure to ensure consistent information is provided in a streamlined manner during a pandemic.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is currently in the planning stages for this initiative. During a pandemic event monitor the following website for updates:  
[http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/providers/program/emu/emu\\_mn.html](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/providers/program/emu/emu_mn.html)

For more information on influenza pandemic, visit the "What you should know about a flu pandemic" fact sheet on the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care website at: [health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/pubhealth/flu/panflu/languages\\_mn.html](http://health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/pubhealth/flu/panflu/languages_mn.html).