

H1N1 and the Common Flu

It's that time of year again - Flu season. But this year is a little different - the emergence of the H1N1 (swine) flu virus. While there is considerable debate between the public health experts on how best to approach H1N1 (and no shortage of media coverage), there are universal steps you can take to minimize your exposure to both the common flu and H1N1 flu viruses - most importantly, education and prevention.

What is influenza?

Influenza, commonly called "the flu", is a contagious disease caused by viruses that infect the respiratory tract including nose, throat, and lungs. H1N1 is one strain of influenza.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Common symptoms of influenza include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, headache, muscle aches, and fatigue.

Most people who get the flu recover completely. Some people, especially the elderly and those with chronic health problems, can develop serious complications. These include pneumonia and aggravation of pre-existing medical conditions such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

How is influenza transmitted?

The influenza viruses mainly are spread from person to person through droplets produced while coughing or sneezing. Droplets of an infected person are propelled by coughing and sneezing into the air and are deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby.

The influenza viruses can also be transmitted by indirect contact by touching a contaminated object or surface and then touching your own mouth, eyes or nose before washing your hands. Viruses can survive on surfaces - longer on hard, impermeable surfaces than on porous surfaces. The viruses can still be infective for two hours and possibly up to eight hours.

What are the treatment and prevention measures?

Those who will benefit most from immunization and those who care for them include:

- People under 65 with chronic health conditions
- Pregnant women
- Children 6 months to less than 5 years of age
- People living in remote and isolated settings or communities
- Health care workers involved in pandemic response or the delivery of essential health care services

- Household contacts and care providers of persons at high risk who cannot be immunized or may not respond to vaccines
- Populations otherwise identified as high risk

Other people who would benefit from immunization include:

- Children 5 to 18 years of age
- First responders
- Poultry and swine workers
- Adults 19 to 64 years of age
- Adults 65 and older

The seasonal flu can be prevented by annual vaccination. According to the Public Health Association of Canada, it is unlikely that the seasonal flu shot will provide protection against the H1N1 flu virus.

A vaccine will be available for both the seasonal flu and H1N1. Consult your provincial health authority or www.fightflu.ca for your provincial vaccination schedule.

Are there other ways to prevent the infection?

To prevent the transmission of the common flu and H1N1, use the following good hygiene practices:

- Wash hands thoroughly and often for at least 20 seconds with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- If you are feeling ill, stay home
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or your sleeve, not your hand. Dispose of tissues immediately.
- Talk to a health professional if you experience severe flu-like symptoms.

It is important to note that different strains of the common flu result in approximately 2000-8000 deaths in Canada each year. For 2009 (January 1st to October 15th), H1N1 has been responsible for 79 deaths in Canada. We must take all influenza, including H1N1, seriously.

For more information about the seasonal flu and H1N1, consult www.fightflu.ca, consult the resources below or your local health practitioner.