

H1N1 Influenza – Common Questions

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Saskatchewan
Ministry of
Health

What is H1N1 Influenza Virus?

- H1N1 refers to a subtype of influenza A viruses. This is a genetic mix of viruses that causes respiratory illness.

What is a Pandemic?

- A pandemic is when there is widespread transmission of the virus from person to person in several countries throughout the world.
- A pandemic refers to the levels of virus activity and not the *severity* of the disease.

What is the situation for H1N1 in Saskatchewan?

- There is currently a low level of the influenza activity circulating within the community.
- It is expected that there will be an increase in the number of people becoming sick with H1N1 during the fall and winter, which is typical in the flu season.

How is H1N1 spread?

H1N1 influenza is spread the same way as regular seasonal influenza.

- It can be spread directly from person to person through coughing or sneezing.
- It can be spread indirectly by touching contaminated items then touching the eyes, nose or mouth.
- Transmission is most likely to occur during the first few days of obvious illness. It is recommended that persons who are ill with influenza symptoms should stay home from work or school and limit contact with others and not return to routine activities outside the home until they are symptom free.
- Influenza is a respiratory illness and cannot be spread through food.

How do I protect myself from getting H1N1?

There are very simple but effective measures that everyone can use to reduce their risk of getting sick.

- Wash hands frequently with soap and warm water.
- Cough and sneeze into a tissue, throw the tissue away in the garbage and wash hands, or cough and sneeze into your arm.
- Clear shared surfaces frequently, such as telephones, computer keyboards, door handles etc.
- Stay two metres or six feet away from a coughing or ill person if you are able.
- Stay home if you are ill with mild to moderate symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

- Sudden onset of fever and cough.
- There may also be sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, chills, fatigue or weakness.
- Vomiting and/or diarrhea may be present and fever may not be prominent.

How serious is H1N1 influenza?

- Most H1N1 illness to date in Saskatchewan and Canada has been mild to moderate.
- Severity can range from mild to severe and appears to be more severe in people with underlying illnesses including chronic lung diseases, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, immune deficiency, and in the 2nd and 3rd trimester of pregnancy.

When should I go see a doctor?

You do NOT need to see a doctor if your symptoms are mild or moderate.

You should see a doctor as soon as possible if you have:

- difficulty breathing
- shortness of breath
- chest pain
- severe or persistent vomiting
- **Adults**- high fever that lasts more than two days
- **Children** – severe tiredness
- confusion or difficulty waking an ill person

If you do visit your doctor, you will not necessarily be tested to confirm you have the H1N1 strain of influenza.

Is there treatment for H1N1 Influenza?

Antivirals –

- Antivirals are a prescription medication that help to reduce symptoms, shorten the length of illness and reduce the risk of complications.
- They should be taken after onset of symptoms – up to and including after 48 hours of onset of symptoms.
- Antivirals should only be given if symptoms are moderate to severe, or if influenza symptoms occur in individuals with underlying illness.

Vaccine -

- A vaccine will produce immunity to the disease.
- A Pandemic H1N1 vaccine will be available by November.
- Two doses of the H1N1 vaccine will likely be required.
- The vaccine will be administered over an eight week period.
- The first dose will be given over a four week period.
- It will be available *free* to everyone who wants it throughout Saskatchewan.
- The clinics will be run by the health regions and some larger employers. Watch for information about clinics in your area.

Seasonal Influenza Immunization

Will there still be a regular flu shot?

- Seasonal influenza immunization will still be available as in previous years.
- The seasonal flu shots contain immunization for three circulating influenza strains as determined by the World Health Organization.
- The Government of Saskatchewan pays for seasonal influenza immunizations for people in high risk groups which include people over age 65, children between 6 months and 24 months, pregnant women, people with chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart and lung disease, health care workers and workers involved in the destruction of poultry infected with avian influenza (bird flu).
- Many employers also offer free seasonal flu shots to their employees.
- Seasonal influenza immunization is available to anyone for a small fee. Contact your local public health office in your health region.

Will the seasonal flu shot protect me against H1N1?

- No. There is no immunity to H1N1 influenza in the regular seasonal flu shot.

Do I need to get both seasonal and H1N1 influenza immunizations?

- Immunization for both H1N1 and seasonal influenza is highly recommended.
- Immunization is especially important if you are at a higher risk of developing serious disease – such as if you have chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart and lung disease or are pregnant.
- Seasonal influenza immunization is especially recommended for people over age 65 as well.

Prevention and Management of Influenza

Home

- Ensure everyone washes hands often and thoroughly in warm, soapy water. If running water and soap is not available, alternatives such as alcohol-based hand sanitizers can be used.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or arm. If tissue is used, be sure to wash or sanitize hands immediately.
- Follow good basic health measures like proper nutrition, good hydration, and use fever medications as directed to relieve symptoms.
- Monitor your health and the health of every household member everyday for influenza symptoms.
- If someone becomes sick, identify a separate room in the house to care for sick family members. Collect games, books, movies and other items for entertainment.
- If the sick family member is in a vulnerable risk group (i.e. under 2 years, asthma, cancer, diabetes, etc) that could increase the risk for complications (i.e.

pneumonia) arrange for a medical assessment by a health care provider as early as possible and preferably within 48 hours of becoming ill.

- Avoid regular activities such as shopping, school or playing with others until symptoms resolve.
- Pillows, linens, eating utensils, cups, hand towels, etc should not be shared without washing first. Use regular household detergents and normal dishwashing liquids.
- Develop an emergency call list. Include child care at home for illness or school closure, and an alternate care giver in case you become ill.
- Consider having a “flu buddy” – someone who can check in on you or your family if you are sick to help with things like meals or essential supplies.
- Get yourself and your family vaccinated with the Pandemic H1N1 vaccine when vaccine becomes available.

Workplace

The best method of ensuring a healthy workplace is to practice infection control techniques.

How can influenza be prevented in the workplace?

Hand hygiene

- Wash hands after direct contact with individuals.
- Wash hands for 15 seconds using soap, friction and warm running water.
- Ensure areas for hand washing are kept well supplied.
- If unable to wash hands immediately, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Cough and sneeze hygiene

- Cover nose and mouth with tissue when sneezing and coughing
- Use disposable, one-use tissues. If no tissue, cough into the arm.
- Be sure to wash hands or use alcohol based hand sanitizer after coughing, sneezing or using tissues and encourage children to do the same.
- Influenza can spread from hand to eye and nose contact – avoid touching these areas.
- Wearing a mask is not a necessary measure at this time.

What kind of cleaning can help prevent influenza?

Viruses can live on surfaces for up to 48 hours. Develop a facility routine for cleaning surfaces.

- Hard surfaces that are touched frequently should be cleansed at least daily and when obviously soiled using any commonly available household cleaning products.
- There is no special handling requirement for soiled laundry.
- Handle all waste materials with usual precautions. Line or double line waste baskets and dispose daily.

How should a workplace respond to staff or clients with influenza like symptoms?

- As is necessary with any respiratory illness, staff that develop a fever and cough should be requested to stay home until symptoms resolve. If the employee is ill enough, they need to seek medical attention.
- Distance provides protection, so keeping some distance between staff and a coughing client and turning away while the client is coughing will decrease the risk of transmission.

When should a workplace setting notify public health?

- Notify your regional public health office if there is an unusual number of sick staff for example when more than 10% of staff are home because of influenza like illness.

Are workplace settings to be closed?

- There is no recommendation to close workplaces in Saskatchewan. If there is sufficient staff to enable a workplace to function there is no need to close.

School Settings

- Schools and child care programs offer very controlled environments and have the ability to implement measures that can limit the transmission of virus and to identify influenza activity.
- Students, teachers, staff and parents can play a major roll in controlling the spread of illness.
- Everyone has a part to play and it starts with good infection prevention measures like handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes and staying home when ill.
- Widespread school closures are not recommended. Decisions about school closures will be assessed individually between local authorities and local public health officials.

First Nations and Métis Populations

- Saskatchewan established enhanced surveillance for disease activity in northern and remote communities.
- Enhanced surveillance will continue throughout the fall and winter flu season.
- The Ministry of Health, working closely with the health regions, has ensured quick access to antiviral medication, which has helped to contain the spread of the disease in some isolated areas.
- The Ministry of Health is working with health regions, provincial and federal partners to ensure our most vulnerable populations receive timely and appropriate care.