

Protecting the Circle of Life: What You Should Know About Pandemic Flu

This fact sheet provides information about pandemic influenza (flu) and what you can do to reduce the effects of a flu pandemic on you, your family, and your community.

What Is Pandemic Flu?

A “pandemic” is a worldwide epidemic in which many people become sick and some may die. Certain types of flu viruses can spread quickly to most countries in the world and cause a flu pandemic. Unlike the seasonal flu that occurs every winter in Canada, pandemic flu can occur at any time of year.

Three flu pandemics emerged during the twentieth century: the pandemic flu of 1918, which resulted in some 50,000 deaths in Canada, including whole Canadian Aboriginal and Inuit communities, and over 20 million people worldwide; the Asian Flu in 1957; and the Hong Kong Flu in 1968. First Nations’ elders still remember the terrible effects of the 1918 flu pandemic in their communities.

What Are the Symptoms?

Pandemic flu is likely to cause the same symptoms as seasonal flu. The symptoms may be more severe because nobody will have any immunity or protection against that particular virus. Symptoms include fever, headache, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Children can also have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

What Causes Pandemic Flu?

Pandemics are caused by a new flu virus that is very different from any circulating strains. Few - if any - will have immunity to this new virus. This lack of immunity allows the virus to spread widely, easily, and to cause more serious illness.

Who is at Risk?

Once a flu pandemic starts, everybody will be at risk of catching pandemic flu. Overcrowded living conditions and poorer health could make First Nations people among the most vulnerable Canadians if a pandemic hits.

How Does it Spread?

The virus spreads from person to person whenever someone who has the flu coughs or sneezes. You can also get the flu simply by touching a surface like a telephone or door knob that has been touched by someone who has the flu. If you have touched a contaminated surface, it can pass from your hand to your nose or mouth.

How Will it Affect You and Your Community?

It is difficult to predict what effect a pandemic will have on First Nations communities. Isolated communities may be at greater risk of high attack rates if the pandemic flu virus is introduced. On the other hand, reduced exposure to those from outside the community, along with good hygiene practices, may help protect the community.

A flu pandemic could last for up to eight weeks and may return, affecting different parts of the community at different times. Access to health services, already limited in remote communities, will likely be further restricted as more people become sick and nurses risk becoming sick themselves.

Respecting the Circle: What You Can Do

For your community

You can reduce the risk of catching or spreading the flu to your family, friends, and neighbours during a pandemic.

- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue whenever possible.
- Cough into your sleeve if no tissue is available.
- Dispose of dirty tissues promptly and carefully put them in bags and put the bags in bins.
- Avoid travelling and crowds whenever possible.
- Maintain good hygiene to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to your face or to other people. Wash your hands often with soap and warm, running water for at least 15 seconds or use a hand sanitizer containing 60 to 90 per cent alcohol.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces like kitchen countertops and door handles often.
- Teach these tips to your children to help them to protect themselves and others.

For yourself and your family

You can take care of yourself if you do catch the flu.

- Stay at home and rest.
- Take medicines such as aspirin, Tylenol or ibuprofen to relieve the symptoms; be sure to follow the instructions with the medicines. **Note:** Do not give children under 16 aspirin or ready-made flu remedies containing aspirin.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Have separate eating utensils and towels.
- Eat well, including plenty of vegetables, fruits, and whole grain products.
- Exercise on a regular basis and get plenty of rest.
- Stay away from people who are sick, if this is practical. You should especially try to stay at least one meter (three feet) away from people sick with flu like illness.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth.

- Avoid public gatherings and crowds.
- Don't share eating utensils or drinks.
- If a family member is sick, keep their personal items such as towels and toothbrushes separate from those of the rest of the family.
- Get a flu shot each year; it won't protect you against pandemic flu, but it can help you to stay healthy.
- If you are over 65 years of age, ask your health care provider for a shot to protect you against pneumococcal infection.
- Take antiviral medication if recommended by your health care provider.

Pandemic Flu Prevention

A pandemic flu vaccine cannot be manufactured until the pandemic influenza virus has been identified, and it may take up to six months for the vaccine to be developed. Therefore, during the early stages of a pandemic, antiviral drugs may be the only medicine available to treat the flu.

What Are Antiviral Drugs?

Antiviral drugs are medications that can be used during a pandemic 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 (i.e., within 48 hours), they can reduce flu symptoms, shorten the length of the illness, and reduce serious complications.

Antiviral drugs will be provided at no charge to anyone who has the flu and would benefit from them.

Are There Supplies of Antiviral Drugs?

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 antiviral drugs to treat 25 per cent of Ontarians.

Should a pandemic emerge before the 25 per cent level is reached, the antiviral drugs will be given to those who are most likely to benefit and to those who perform essential services.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is working in partnership with the First Nations and Inuit Health, Chiefs of Ontario and Political Territorial Organizations to ensure that First Nation communities will have the same access to vaccines and antivirals as any other Ontarian during an influenza pandemic.

For More Information

Visit our website at

www.health.gov.on.ca/pandemic

Or call INFOline 1-866-801-7242

TTY 1-800-387-5559