

Influenza Self-Care: It's In Your Hands

How to care for yourself and others with influenza

This document gives valuable information on:

- How to prevent influenza;
- How to help yourself and others when influenza happens;
- When to seek medical care.

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by a virus. As with other viral illnesses, antibiotics do not work against an influenza virus. Various strains of influenza virus circulate throughout the world each year. In Canada, influenza usually affects people during the winter, between November and April. The influenza virus changes slightly from year to 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.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza spreads rapidly among people. The influenza virus passes from person to person by droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. Droplets travel through the air one to two metres (three to six feet) allowing the virus to enter the eyes, nose or mouth of people nearby. The virus can live on hard surfaces (door knobs, telephones, computer keyboards, light switches, countertops, etc.) for one to two days. Influenza virus can also live on cloth, tissues and paper and especially on hands. Infection can occur when people touch any surfaces and then touch either their own mouth or nose, or someone else's, before washing their hands. People develop symptoms of influenza from one to four days after becoming infected. They are contagious from the day **before** they have the first symptoms until at least five days after the symptoms start.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of influenza include:

- 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 human swine 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. Influenza symptoms are different from those of a cold or a stomach upset.

What is the difference between influenza, a cold, or stomach upset?

Description/ Symptoms	Respiratory Infection		Gastrointestinal Infection
	Influenza	Common Cold	Stomach Upset
Virus involved	Influenza A or B Note: H1N1 Influenza Virus (Human Swine Influenza) is a type of Influenza A	Many different kinds of viruses such as rhinovirus, coronavirus, adenovirus, etc.	Norovirus (Norwalk-like viruses) is the most common
Fever	Usually high with sudden onset and lasts three to four days	Sometimes	Rarely
Headache	Usually, can be severe	Rarely	Sometimes
Chills, aches, pain	Usually and often severe	Rarely	Common
Loss of appetite	Sometimes	Sometimes	Frequently – usually nausea, vomiting and diarrhea occur as well
Cough	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely
Sore throat	Sometimes	Sometimes	Rarely
Sniffles or sneezes	Sometimes	Usually	Rarely
Extreme tiredness	Usually – tiredness may last two or three weeks or more	Rarely	Sometimes
Involves whole body	Usually	Never	Stomach and bowel only
Symptoms appear quickly	Yes	More gradual	Yes
Complications	Pneumonia, kidney failure, swelling of the brain and death	Sinus infection or ear infection	Dehydration
Vaccine	Yearly vaccine covers two influenza A strains and one influenza B strain Vaccine for human swine influenza is not yet available	No vaccine available	No vaccine available

Note: A stomach upset is sometimes incorrectly called the "stomach flu". There is no such illness as "stomach flu". As noted in the chart, stomach upsets are caused by viruses and other micro-organisms but not by the influenza virus.

How serious is influenza?

Certain people are at risk of developing serious complications, such as pneumonia, which may even result in death. These include:

- Children younger than two years of age and adults 65 years of age and older.
- People with weakened immune systems.
- People with certain chronic illnesses, such as heart, lung or kidney disease, diabetes and cancer.

Every year, influenza and its complications have a significant effect on the healthcare system. It also affects school or work absenteeism.

How to protect yourself and others against influenza

Choose to immunize

The seasonal influenza vaccine is still available for high risk groups and travellers.

Note: The current seasonal vaccine does not protect against the H1N1 Influenza Virus (Human Swine Influenza).

Pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine

Pneumonia can sometimes occur after an influenza infection. Pneumococcal vaccine protects against the bacteria that most often causes pneumonia. Alberta Health and Wellness provides this vaccine free-of-charge to those who are at risk, including:

- People aged 65 years and older.
- Residents of long-term care facilities.
- People two years of age and older with certain chronic health conditions.
- People living in homeless or chronically disadvantaged situations.

Most people only need to receive the pneumococcal immunization once in their lifetime. The vaccine can be given at any time of the year and can be administered at the same time as the influenza vaccine. Pneumococcal vaccine for babies is included in Alberta's routine immunization program.

Wash your hands!

Next to immunization, the single most important way to prevent influenza is frequent hand washing.

Wash your hands before:

- Handling or eating food or feeding others.
- Brushing or flossing teeth.
- Putting in or taking out contact lenses.
- Treating wounds or cuts.

Wash your hands after:

- Having any contact with a person who is sick or their immediate environment.
- Going to the toilet, helping someone else use the toilet or changing a diaper.
- Blowing your nose or wiping someone else's nose.
- Coughing or sneezing.
- Treating wounds or cuts.
- Handling garbage.
- Returning home from school, work or shopping.
- Children should wash their hands after playing with toys shared with other children.

Encourage children to wash their hands often:

- Teach by example.
- Help young children wash their hands.
- Make sure the sink, soap and towels are within reach.
- Place hand washing reminders at eye level for children.

How to wash 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 sing the song, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, (about 15 to 20 seconds).
- Scrub all over, including the backs of the hands, the wrists, between the fingers and under the finger nails.
- 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.
- Store liquid soaps in closed containers and do not top up liquid soap containers. When the soap container is empty, it should be washed and dried before refilling with liquid soap.



How to wash hands with alcohol hand rubs (gels, liquids and foams):

- When soap and water are not available, hand rubs are an excellent choice to use.
- Use only alcohol-based hand rubs. They should contain at least 60 percent alcohol.
- Put some of the hand rub (gel, liquid or foam) 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 rubs 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 rub.
- Young children need help when using hand rubs. This is to make sure that their hands are dry before they touch anything or put their hands in their mouths.

Cover your cough – respiratory etiquette

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when sneezing or coughing.
- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve, not on your hands.
- Throw away tissues after wiping your nose or covering a cough.
- Wash hands after coughing, sneezing or using tissues.
- Keep your hands and fingers away from your eyes, nose and mouth.

Other ways to prevent the spread of influenza

- Avoid crowds.
- Visit those who have influenza only if necessary, and stand more than two metres (six feet) away from them.
- Stay home from work, school, running errands and other activities when ill.

- Keep personal items separate if a household member is sick. Clean surfaces around them often with a detergent cleanser.
- Do not share personal items or drinks.
- Clean shared surfaces such as door knobs, light switches, telephones, computer keyboards, etc. frequently.

Be prepared

Everyone should plan ahead in case they become ill with influenza. This is especially important if you live alone, are a single parent or a caregiver.

- Have enough fluids and other supplies, such as tissues, on hand to last one to two weeks.
- Have medication for fever and a thermometer handy.
- Arrange for a backup caregiver for loved ones, in case you are ill.

How to manage 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 (5ml) 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.

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 affect the liver or kidneys and 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.

For a sore throat:

- If salt water 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 healthcare provider before taking these products.

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.
- 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 young child.

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 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.

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.

For example:

- A fever may be the only symptom of influenza in babies.
- Some babies may not be able to drink fluids or breast feed.
- 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.
- 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.



- Dress the child in lightweight clothing and keep room temperature at 20 C (68 F).
- Offer water or juice or breast feed 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 labeled 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.
- 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.
 - When the product should not be used.
 - 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 care giver 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 it is not caused by a stuffy nose.
- 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.