



INFLUENZA

What is influenza?

Influenza (or “the flu”) is caused by infection with influenza viruses. It mainly affects the throat and lungs, but it can also cause problems with the heart and other parts of the body, especially in people with health problems. Influenza viruses are seasonal and cause outbreaks each winter in Canada. Every few decades, a new type of influenza virus will emerge, causing a severe and widespread epidemic (or pandemic).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually occur one to three days after infection, and they may include sudden onset of:

- fever;
- headache;
- muscle and joint pain;
- sore throat;
- cough;
- runny or stuffy nose; and
- severe fatigue.

Children and the elderly may have gastroenteritis symptoms.

Most people recover within a week. Compared with many other infections (such as the common cold), influenza tends to cause more severe symptoms and complications. Complications can include pneumonia, heart failure or worsening of other illnesses.

How is influenza spread?

The influenza virus is easily spread by coughing, sneezing, talking and by contact with contaminated hands and surfaces. Infected people are contagious about one day before symptoms start until three to five days after.

How is influenza diagnosed?

- Your health-care provider may diagnose an influenza-like-illness by examination and symptoms.
- The specific diagnosis of influenza can only be confirmed though by testing a sample of the fluid from the back of your nose and throat. These tests are usually only needed if the illness is part of an outbreak, is unusually severe or if there are complications.

Some family physicians, hospitals and community centres assist with influenza surveillance and may take a nasal swab to test for influenza. This helps inform health departments and public health agencies when influenza is circulating in the community and the type of influenza virus causing most infections.

Who is at risk of influenza?

Anyone can get influenza. The elderly, people with other illnesses (such as heart disease, lung disease or diabetes), pregnant women and small children are most likely to develop complications.

How can influenza be prevented?

The best way to prevent influenza is to get the vaccine at least two weeks before the beginning of influenza season. The influenza vaccine is recommended for everyone six months and older. People who are at high risk of complications from influenza and their care-givers and household contacts should receive the vaccine.

People eligible for publicly funded influenza vaccine can receive the vaccine from their health-care provider or pharmacist. Children six to 59 months can attend clinics at their local Public Health Office.

Other ways to help protect yourself include keeping your hands away from your eyes and nose, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and eating healthy.

Don't spread it around!

If you develop symptoms of influenza:

- stay at home until you are better;
- cover your coughs and sneezes with the inside of your elbow or with a tissue. Dispose of the tissue in the garbage after use;
- wash your hands with soap and running water after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose, and before touching other people or objects; and
- when visiting the doctor, call ahead to see if the doctor can place you in a separate waiting area and ask for a mask if you are coughing and have to wait near other people.

How is influenza treated?

Drink plenty of fluids and get plenty of rest. Medications for fever and pain, such as Acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) and Ibuprofen (e.g. Advil®), can be given if necessary, according to the manufacturer's directions.

Medications for influenza (oseltamivir and zanamivir) can reduce the severity and the duration of illness if taken within two days of the first symptoms. They are available only on prescription from your health-care provider.

What is the public health response?

Laboratories must confidentially notify cases of influenza to the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, communicable disease control unit. The unit also monitors the incidence of influenza in the community by tracking the number of people presenting to selected clinics with influenza-like-illness, and the number of laboratory samples submitted to selected laboratories. Your local Public Health unit can advise on control measures during outbreaks.

Further Information

Please contact your health-care provider or local Public Health office.