

# **Alberta Health Services**

## **Common Questions - Pandemic H1N1 Influenza Virus (August 19, 2009)**

**<http://www.health.alberta.ca/health-info/influenza-H1N1-questions.html>**

### **1. What is pandemic H1N1 influenza virus?**

- It is a new strain of the influenza A virus (2009). The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared it a pandemic virus.
- It contains a combination of genes from pigs (swine), bird (avian) and human influenza viruses that have never previously been detected in humans and swine.
- Most people have no immunity to protect them from getting sick with this new virus.
- This virus is being detected in humans in many countries around the world and is spreading from person to person in communities.

[Compare pandemic H1N1 influenza and seasonal influenza](#)

### **2. Why is the pandemic H1N1 influenza virus sometimes called swine flu?**

It was originally called “swine flu” as laboratory testing demonstrated that some of the genes in this new virus were similar to influenza viruses that normally circulate in pigs (swine).

### **3. How does the severity of illness caused by pandemic H1N1 influenza virus compare to seasonal influenza?**

The severity of illness has been similar to seasonal influenza, causing mostly mild illness. However, there have been some cases of severe disease requiring hospitalization and a few deaths.

### **4. How does pandemic H1N1 influenza virus spread?**

- It spreads the same way as seasonal influenza – from person to person through “droplets” that are released through the air when an infected person coughs and sneezes. The droplets can then be breathed in by others.
- The virus can also be contracted through:
  - Shaking hands that are contaminated with the virus; and

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- Touching a hard surface, such as a counter or door handle that has been contaminated with the virus.
- A person then becomes infected by then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.
- **The virus is considered infectious for up to eight hours on hard surfaces and only a few minutes on soft surfaces.**

### **5. How is pandemic H1N1 influenza diagnosed?**

- People with mild symptoms generally do not require testing.
- If your health care provider feels your symptoms require further investigation, a nose swab may be taken and sent to the lab for confirmation. Other tests, such as blood work, may also be ordered.

### **6. What is the incubation period for pandemic H1N1 influenza virus?**

- The incubation period is the time from when people become infected until they develop symptoms.
- It appears to have a somewhat longer incubation period than seasonal influenza of up to four days.

### **7. How long is a person contagious if they develop pandemic H1N1 influenza?**

- Usually persons are contagious from one day before, up to seven days after symptoms begin.
- Children, especially younger children, immunocompromised individuals and those with severe illness may be contagious for a longer period, i.e. up to 10 days
- If you are sick with influenza-like illness, stay home from work or school for seven days from the start of your symptoms or until you are able to resume normal activities, whichever is shorter.
- Avoid close contact with others as much as possible. This is to keep you from infecting others and spreading the virus further.

### **8. What are the symptoms of pandemic H1N1 influenza virus?**

The symptoms of pandemic H1N1 influenza virus in Canada have been generally mild, but illness can be severe for some individuals. The symptoms are similar to seasonal influenza and may include:

- Sudden onset of fever and cough;
- Fatigue;

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- Muscle aches;
- Lack of appetite;
- Some people may also experience a runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

### **9. How can an influenza virus spread from pigs to people?**

- Different strains of influenza regularly circulate in our environment, including strains that can cause illness in humans, birds and pigs.
- Swine influenza viruses do not normally infect humans. Humans and animals can sometimes pass strains of influenza back and forth to one another through direct close contact, such as in pig production barns and livestock exhibits at fairs.
- When swine influenza does infect a human, there is also a risk that the animal influenza can mutate and then spread directly between humans. The new pandemic H1N1 influenza virus originated in this way.

### **10. Can I catch pandemic H1N1 influenza virus from eating pork?**

No. pandemic H1N1 influenza virus is not spread through eating properly handled and prepared pork or pork byproducts. It does not pose a food safety concern.

### **11. What is being done to test the pandemic H1N1 influenza virus to know if it is changing?**

- Alberta's Provincial Laboratory for Public Health provides samples to the National Microbiology Laboratory, which tests both human and animal virus samples.
- Information on test results is added to an international database used by experts to look for changes in viruses.

## **Prevention and treatment**

### **12. What can Albertans do to protect themselves and others from pandemic H1N1 influenza virus?**

Albertans can take simple measures to minimize the risk of being infected.

1. Stay home from work or school for seven days after your symptoms begin or until you are feeling well enough to resume normal activities, whichever is shorter.

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2. Help prevent infection with pandemic influenza by getting the vaccine that is anticipated to be available to the public in November 2009.
3. Clean hands frequently, especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose. Wash your hands with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. When done correctly, this is the single most effective way to reduce the spread of infections.
4. Cough and sneeze into your arm, not your hand.
5. Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth after shaking hands or touching hard surfaces like counters and door handles or other surfaces that may harbour influenza and other viruses. Keep common surfaces clean and disinfected.
6. Stay at least two metres (six feet) away from people who are experiencing influenza-like symptoms. This is called social distancing and includes staying away from crowds when influenza is circulating in the community.
7. Other steps to keep yourself healthy include:
  - o Healthy eating;
  - o Maintaining an active lifestyle; and
  - o Getting enough rest and sleep.

### **13. Should Albertans wear masks to prevent catching pandemic H1N1 influenza virus while out in the community?**

No. Evidence shows that wearing masks is not effective in preventing the spread of influenza in the general public.

### **14. Should people be avoiding exposure to pigs?**

- The pandemic H1N1 influenza virus is spreading between humans. There is no risk from close contact with healthy pigs.
- Individuals with influenza symptoms should avoid close contact with pigs to reduce the possibility of introducing a new influenza virus into domestic swine populations
- For people in close contact with pigs, the recommendations to avoid infection are the same as for regular seasonal influenza – frequent hand cleaning, getting a yearly influenza shot, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill.

### **15. Can I get antiviral medication if I have symptoms of influenza?**

- Generally, antivirals are not recommended for treatment of mild influenza.
- Severe cases are receiving treatment with antiviral medications.

## **Pandemic H1N1 influenza vaccine**

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### **16. Is there a vaccine for pandemic H1N1 influenza virus?**

Efforts are underway to develop, test and produce a pandemic H1N1 influenza vaccine. The pandemic H1N1 influenza vaccine is anticipated to be available to the public in November 2009.

- The seasonal influenza vaccine being used in Canada this year is not effective against this new strain of influenza, but is an important measure to prevent infection with seasonal influenza.
- [Immunization is an important measure to prevent getting influenza.](#)

### **How to care for yourself and others**

### **17. What should you do if you are concerned that you have symptoms of pandemic H1N1 influenza virus?**

- [Refer to answer on pandemic H1N1 influenza home page.](#)

### **18. What should I do if I have been in contact with someone who is sick with pandemic H1N1 influenza virus?**

- If you are well, no further action is needed. Monitor yourself for symptoms of influenza illness for four days.
  - The incubation period for the virus is the time from when people become infected until they develop symptoms.
- If you have symptoms of a respiratory infection with a sudden fever and cough, [refer to answer on the home page.](#)

### **Pandemic H1N1 influenza virus in Alberta, Canada and worldwide**

### **19. What is being done to contain the spread of pandemic H1N1 influenza virus in Alberta?**

- Surveillance has been increased and Alberta health care providers are on alert and are looking for cases of influenza-like illness.
- The health care system in Alberta is on alert and continues to respond to the pandemic as the situation evolves.

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- Health care workers have been provided with detailed advice on how to manage possible and/or confirmed cases.
- Communication to Albertans has been increased to ensure they are well-informed as to how to best protect themselves and their families.

### **20. Is Alberta's pandemic plan in place?**

Yes, Alberta has a pandemic influenza plan in place.

- Alberta's Plan for Pandemic Influenza will direct activities of the Government of Alberta, Alberta Health Services and other key groups in response to pandemic influenza, to provide a coordinated and phased-in response.
  - [Read the Alberta Pandemic Plan](#)
- Alberta's plan is being updated as the current pandemic situation changes.

### **21. What is the government of Canada doing to protect Canadians and control the spread of pandemic H1N1 influenza?**

1. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is working with international partners to learn more about how the pandemic H1N1 influenza virus spreads to best control and slow the spread of disease.
2. An overall implementation for the health sector of *The Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan* is underway.
3. There is close collaboration with provinces and territories to optimize the response to the pandemic alert including monitoring essential health-related resources and supplies.
4. The National Emergency Stockpile System (NESS) which contains hospital supplies, equipment and other pharmaceuticals (including a stockpile of antiviral medications) is being managed.
5. There is ongoing involvement with the vaccine manufacturer for pandemic vaccine development, testing and production.
6. Communicating to Canadians through the Citizen Readiness Campaign to ensure they are well-informed as to how to protect themselves and their families.

### **22. How does the World Health Organization (WHO) determine what level of pandemic alert is required?**

A six-phased pandemic alert is used to determine the approach to activating plans that prepare for and respond to a new influenza virus capable of causing a worldwide epidemic.

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- [More information is on the WHO website.](#)

### **23. What does WHO raising the pandemic level to Phase 6 mean for Albertans?**

The Phase 6 designation is measure of where and how widespread the new virus is around the world.

- It is not indicative of how severe the disease is. The risk level to the general public remains low.
- Alberta has a pandemic plan that has been unfolding in response to the levels of pandemic alert.

*Updated: August 19, 2009*