



Region of Waterloo

PUBLIC HEALTH

FACT SHEET

Caring for someone who is sick with flu

Here are some ideas to keep in mind when caring for someone who is sick. Most people who get sick with the H1N1 virus can be cared for at home.

Note: Pregnant women, those who have chronic medical conditions (e.g. heart or lung disease, diabetes, cancer—any chronic health problem that requires regular medical attention), very young children (under 5 years of age) and persons over 65 years of age are at greater risk of complications from both seasonal influenza and H1N1. These groups should contact their doctor as soon as they start to feel sick (fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle pain, joint pain, or extreme fatigue). Doctors may prescribe a medication (i.e. antiviral) to these persons, but in order to be effective, they must be administered within 48 hours of onset of symptoms.

STEP #1 Protect yourself and others

- If possible, choose only one family member to care for a sick person. Pregnant women and people with medical problems may want to avoid providing direct care if possible.
- Clean your hands frequently with either soap and warm water or an alcohol-based hand rub (containing 60–90% alcohol) before and after caring for the sick person, and after touching items that the sick person has touched.
- Frequently clean commonly touched areas of the house (table tops, keyboards, door knobs, remote controls, telephones, light switches, etc).
- You may want to consider having the sick person wear a surgical mask when they are in close contact with others (i.e. within two metres or 6 feet), to help reduce the spread of the virus.

If the sick person cannot wear a mask, encourage the use of a tissue when coughing and sneezing. Dispose of tissue immediately.

STEP #2 Allow the sick person to rest (away from others)

- It is expected that anyone sick with the H1N1 flu virus will need lots of rest and will be contagious for about seven days from the onset of the symptoms—especially in the first few days.
- Clean items (such as the phone, TV remote) and surfaces that the sick person has touched, using normal household disinfectant. The virus can survive on hard surfaces for up to 48 hours.
- The sick person can resume normal activities (such as returning to work or school) once their fever has been absent for 24 hours and the person is feeling well enough to resume normal activities.

Caring for someone who is sick with flu... continued

STEP #3

Treat the fever and cough

- Fever often comes with chills or aches and pains. Certain medications (such as acetaminophen, for example Tylenol®, or ibuprofen, for example Advil®) may help to reduce these symptoms. Do not give Aspirin® to children to treat fever, as it has been linked to Reye's Syndrome.¹

¹ A potentially fatal disease associated with aspirin consumption by children with viral diseases.

STEP #4

Give lots of fluids and nutritious food and ensure a smoke-free environment

- Warm drinks, such as tea with honey and lemon, or chicken soup, can be very soothing for a sore throat. The sick person may not have an appetite, but simple foods may be welcomed.
- Cigarette smoking is hard on the lungs of a person with an infection. The sick person should avoid smoking. Second-hand smoke is harmful also, so people should not smoke around the sick person.

STEP #5

Keep the sick person's things separate

- Each sick person should have his/her own personal items (towel, face cloth, toothbrush etc.) and they should be kept separate from the belongings of others in the house. Wash your hands after touching the items belonging to the sick person and avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

- The influenza virus is easily killed by cleaning with regular household disinfectants and good cleaning practices. Keep common surfaces (door knobs, light switches) clean.

STEP #6

Stay alert for complications

- When treated at home with proper care, most people will begin to feel better after a few days. Take the sick person's temperature daily to track any fever.

If someone develops the following symptoms, they need to be seen by a doctor right away:

- Shortness of breath, rapid or difficult breathing
- Chest pain
- Bluish or greyish skin colour
- Bloody or coloured mucus/spit
- Sudden dizziness or confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- High fever lasting more than three days
- Low blood pressure

Additional symptoms to watch for in children:

- Not drinking enough fluids or eating
- Not waking up or interacting
- Irritability; not wanting to play or be held

*Adapted from: Public Health Agency of Canada and Ontario
Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care*

