

H1N1 Flu Virus Pandemic Guidance Document for Faith Communities and Groups

Released: October 14, 2009

Guidance may change as provincial guidelines are released or the epidemiology of the virus evolves.

Key Messages:

Faith communities have many practices and services that are specific to the populations they serve. This guidance document is designed to provide faith communities with general guidance for their practices as it relates to the H1N1 flu virus.

- Public Health continues to monitor international and local H1N1 surveillance indicators. Based on the information collected to date and provincial recommendation, Public Health is planning for the possibility of a "busy" flu season this fall/winter, with moderate H1N1 activity, but with the anticipation that the surge in demand will likely not overwhelm the health care system.
- The H1N1 flu virus is another strain of the influenza virus. It causes symptoms similar to those of the seasonal flu (fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness), it spreads in the same manner as seasonal influenza does, and the methods to prevent and control it are the same as those for seasonal flu.
- Members of the congregation, staff and volunteers should cover their coughs and sneezes, regularly wash their hands or use a 60-90 per cent alcohol-based hand rub, stay at home if ill, and get the H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccines when available, especially if they are in one of the priority groups for either of the vaccines.
- Information about the seasonal influenza and H1N1 flu virus immunization campaigns (e.g. availability of vaccines, dates of clinics) is evolving. Please visit Waterloo Region's pandemic website — www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca — for the most up-to-date information.
- Faith leaders should think about how they will encourage the ill to remain at home, including developing alternate supports to allow these individuals to worship on their own, but with support from their faith community.
- Frequent cleaning of surfaces and items commonly touched (e.g. "push bars" or handles on doors, light switches, taps and sinks, handrails on stairs, etc.) will help reduce the spread of the virus.
- Based on current information about the H1N1 flu virus, it is NOT recommended that religious services and gatherings, including Sunday school services, be cancelled.

Introduction

- The H1N1 flu virus is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of the seasonal flu. **It is another strain of the influenza virus, and the methods to prevent and control it are the same as those for seasonal flu.**

- Influenza-like-illness (ILI) symptoms include: fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness. In children under 5, gastrointestinal symptoms may also be present and fever may not be prominent.
- H1N1 is most frequent among children, adolescents and young adults. Relatively few people over the age of 60 have contracted the virus.
- Measures to prevent or reduce the spread of influenza, including of the H1N1 strain of influenza, include regular hand-washing, covering coughs and sneezes, staying at home when ill, and immunization (vaccine).

Infection Prevention and Control Practices

- To reduce the spread of H1N1 flu virus, members of the congregation, staff and volunteers should:
 - Regularly wash their hands or use a 60-90 per cent alcohol-based hand rub
 - Cover their coughs and sneezes (with a tissue or one's arm)
 - Stay at home if ill
 - Get the H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccines when available, especially if they are in one of the priority groups for either of the vaccines.*

*Information about the seasonal influenza and H1N1 flu virus immunization campaigns (e.g. availability of vaccines, dates of clinics) is evolving. Please visit Waterloo Region's pandemic website — www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca — for the most up-to-date information.
- Faith leaders should think about how they will encourage the ill to remain at home, including developing alternate supports to allow these individuals to worship on their own, but with support from their faith community.

While not specific to the H1N1 flu virus, faith communities may consider a variety of infection prevention and control measures to reduce the spread of respiratory and enteric (digestive) illnesses, such as the annual fall and winter seasons when they are more frequent.

- Such measures **may** include*:
 - Reduce or discourage the sharing of utensils.
 - Reduce or discourage communal drinking. Consider using disposable cups.
 - Determine if communal drinking or intinction (the method of receiving communion by dipping the bread in the sacramental wine) should be suspended (and at what point). Consider alternatives such as using disposal cups.

*It is up to each faith community to determine what is appropriate given their practices and services as well as the needs and expectations of their congregation.

Physical Layout/Supplies

- Places of worship should:
 - Provide liquid soap, disposable towels and/or hand-dryers in all washrooms, so people can practice proper hand hygiene; or provide 60-90 per cent alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) if hand washing facilities are not readily available.
 - Ensure alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) is out of reach of young children, as it should be used in young children under adult supervision (so that they don't swallow it, etc.)
 - Consider placing posters in washrooms and kitchens as a reminder to wash hands and practice coughs and sneezes. (Public Health has posters available to download on the Region of Waterloo Pandemic Website – www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca)
- Frequent cleaning of surfaces and items commonly touched (e.g. “push bars” or handles on doors, light switches, taps and sinks, handrails on stairs, etc.) will help reduce the spread of the virus.
 - See more under “Environmental Cleaning” below.

Screening

- Active screening (e.g. taking temperatures) of staff, volunteers and members of the congregation for influenza-like illness (ILI) before entering the facility is not recommended.

Practice Hand Hygiene

- Hand hygiene is the single most important measure for preventing the spread of infections.
- Staff, volunteers and members of the congregation should be encouraged to practice hand washing, using soap and water or a 60 – 90 per cent alcohol-based hand rub
- Staff, volunteers and members of the congregation should be encouraged to practice proper hand hygiene:
 - After sneezing or coughing
 - After shaking hands
 - After touching communal religious objects
 - Before distribution of communion (where applicable)
 - Before and after caring for the sick
 - Before and after food preparation
 - Before eating snacks
 - After using the toilet
 - After changing diapers
 - After garbage bag disposal

Practice Cough Etiquette

- Cough etiquette can also play an important role in reducing the spread of influenza.
- Staff, volunteers and members of the congregation should be encouraged to:
 - Cough and sneeze into their sleeve, elbow or “crook” of their arm (not their hands) or to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing
 - Immediately dispose of used tissues in a garbage can
 - Practise hand hygiene after disposing of tissues

Avoid Touching Eyes, Mouth and Nose

- Influenza spreads when the respiratory secretions from the mouth or nose of an infected person come in contact with the mouth, nose or eyes (i.e. mucous membranes) of another person.
- To reduce the spread of influenza and other illnesses, staff, volunteers and members of the congregation should be encouraged to avoid touching their eyes, mouth and nose.

Stay Home When Ill

- Staff, volunteers and members of the congregation who become ill should be encouraged to stay home until they no longer have a fever and are feeling well.

Environmental Cleaning

- The influenza virus can survive for up to 48 hours on hard surfaces.
- The influenza virus is easily killed by cleaning with regular household disinfectants and good cleaning practices.
- Frequent cleaning of surfaces and items commonly touched will help reduce the spread of the virus. Surfaces and items that should be cleaned daily or on days when services are offered include:
 - “Push bars” and handles on doors, all light switches, taps and sinks, handrails on stairs, pew/seat hand contact surfaces, counters in reception areas, telephone receivers, keyboards, computer mouse drivers, fridge handles in kitchen/servery, and any communal touch surfaces.

Managing ILI in Members of the Congregation, Staff and Volunteers

- Ill staff, volunteers and members of the congregation should be advised to stay at home. Staff/volunteers that develop symptoms of influenza (fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness) while at work should leave the facility as soon as possible and not return until they no longer have a fever and are well.
 - Some individuals may experience a cough for days to weeks after infection. Presence of a cough in the absence of other symptoms should not prevent members of the congregation, staff or volunteers from returning to worship.
- Pregnant women and individuals with pre-existing chronic disease are not at an increased risk of contracting influenza. They appear however to be at an increased risk of complications if they get the virus.
 - For pregnant women, very young children (< 5 years of age), and those with pre-existing chronic disease, they should contact their healthcare provider as soon as they become ill (fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness. In children under 5, gastrointestinal symptoms may also be present and fever may not be prominent.)

Considerations of Religious Services/Gatherings Cancellation and Facility Closures

- Cancellation of religious services and gatherings are NOT recommended at present.
- Faith group facility closures are NOT recommended at present.
- However, if a faith organization is contemplating a closure, a number of factors should be considered in this decision, such as:
 - Frequency and severity of ILI cases among staff, volunteers and members of congregation
 - Ability to continue to operate the facility in a safe and healthy manner
 - Emotional and social impact of closure

Considerations of Sunday School and Childcare Rooms in the Facility

- Cancellation of Sunday school services and closure of childcare rooms in faith community facilities are NOT recommended at present.
- Parents of children, children, staff and volunteers who become ill should be encouraged to stay home until they no longer have a fever and are feeling well.
- Parents should be encouraged to develop contingency (child care) plans for child care should their child become ill (which does not involve placing children in other group settings when their child is ill).

For More Information

- Information on how individuals can protect themselves and their families, caring for sick people, and other frequently asked questions about the H1N1 flu virus can be found on Waterloo Region Pandemic Website, at www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca.
- Faith groups or members of the community who have questions or want more information can also call Region of Waterloo Public Health at 519-883-2289.

Other Links and Resources

Public Health Agency of Canada H1N1 flu virus website –
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/index-eng.php>

Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care H1N1 flu virus website –
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/ccom/flu/default.aspx>