

H1N1 Flu Virus Pandemic Guidance Document for Workplaces

Note: Updated October 7, 2009. Guidance may change as the epidemiology of the virus evolves or as new provincial guidelines or directives are released.

Key Messages:

- 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 Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care guidelines on absences from the workplace for individuals who are ill with influenza-like illness remain the same:
 - Individuals working in a **non-healthcare setting** should remain off work until they **no longer have a fever and are feeling 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 an employee from returning to work.
- Employers should not require their employees who report influenza-like symptoms (fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness) to see a doctor for the sole purpose of getting a note in order to return to work or confirm the employee does not have H1N1. This will place an undue burden on primary care services. In addition, confirmatory laboratory tests are not commonly done at this time, and primary care providers are unlikely to provide these notes.
- Employees should cover their coughs and sneezes, regularly wash their hands or use an alcohol-based hand rub (especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing the nose), and stay at home if ill.
- 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. They should contact their healthcare provider as soon as possible if they become ill.
- The use of personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves is currently **not** recommended for the general public or in general workplace settings.
- Information about the seasonal influenza and H1N1 flu virus immunization campaigns continues to evolve. Please visit Waterloo Region's pandemic website — www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca — for the most up-to-date information. As per Ministry direction, workplaces will not be able to offer immunization clinics for the H1N1 vaccine.
- Employees with children or elderly parents may consider developing a family care plan (alternate care arrangements) in the event a member of their family becomes ill.

Background

- The H1N1 flu virus is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of the seasonal flu. **It is a new strain of the influenza virus, and the methods to prevent and control it are the same as those for seasonal flu.**
- Symptoms include fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness.

What do we know about the H1N1 flu virus?

- Most people who have contracted the H1N1 virus have been children, teens or young adults. Relatively few people over the age of 60 have contracted the virus.
- Most people recover in 5 to 7 days with self-care home.

What can employees do to stay healthy?

- The most important steps to prevent the spread of any influenza including H1N1 are:
 - Cover your cough or sneeze
 - Regularly wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand rub
 - Stay home when ill
 - Get the H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccines when available, especially if you are in one of the priority groups for either of the vaccines*

*Information about the seasonal influenza and H1N1 flu virus immunization campaigns continues to evolve. Please visit Waterloo Region's pandemic website — www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca — for the most up-to-date information.

Are there special instructions or guidelines for workplace settings?

- The most effective way to prevent transmission of influenza is by following the steps outlined above
- Workplaces, should, however:
 - Provide liquid soap, disposable towels and/or hand-dryers in 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 easily accessible.
 - Workplaces may consider promoting hand hygiene by placing alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) in a few high-traffic, high visibility places in their workplaces along with posters encouraging hand washing and the use of alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) when hand washing facilities are not easily accessible. (Public Health has posters available to download on the Region of Waterloo Pandemic Website – www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca)
- The influenza virus can survive for up to 48 hours on different surfaces.
 - Frequent cleaning of surfaces and items commonly touched (e.g. door handles, table surfaces) can help reduce the spread of the virus.
 - The influenza virus is easily killed by cleaning with regular household disinfectants and good cleaning practices.
- 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. All individuals should ensure that they practice proper hand hygiene, and pregnant women and those with pre-existing chronic disease should contact their healthcare provider as soon as possible if they become ill.

What should people do if they are ill with flu-like symptoms?

- Individuals working in a **non-healthcare setting** should remain off work until they no longer have a fever and are feeling well again.
- People who experience flu-like symptoms should not go to the hospital emergency department unless directed to do so by their healthcare provider or unless they are seriously ill.
- Employers should not require their employees who report influenza-like symptoms

(fever and cough and one or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain, or weakness) to see a doctor for the sole purpose of getting a note in order to return to work or confirm the employee does not have H1N1. This will place an undue burden on primary care services. In addition, confirmatory laboratory tests are not commonly done at this time, and primary care providers are unlikely to provide these notes.

People can lower their risk by practicing the usual, preventative practices against a range of illnesses that include:

- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze by using a tissue or coughing into your sleeve or upper arm (or into the “crook of your elbow”). Throw the tissue in the garbage after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand rub/sanitizer (ABHR) with 60 to 90 per cent alcohol is also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread easily that way.
- Keep commonly touched surfaces clean and disinfected.
- If you get sick, stay home from work or school until you no longer have a fever and are feeling well. You should also limit contact with others during this time to keep from infecting them.
- If your symptoms worsen, contact your doctor.
- Get the H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccines when available.

For more information

- Workplaces or members of the community who have questions or want more information can call Region of Waterloo Public Health at 519-883-2289.

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>

Region of Waterloo Public Health pandemic website —
<http://www.waterlooregionpandemic.ca>

Region of Waterloo Public Health Project Health website — <http://www.projecthealth.ca/>