



MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND LONG-TERM CARE

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What is influenza?

Influenza, more commonly known as the flu, is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus. Influenza can be a mild or severe illness depending on the type of influenza virus causing it and the age and general health of the person affected.

How is influenza transmitted?

A highly infectious disease, influenza is directly transmitted from person to person primarily when people infected with influenza cough or sneeze, and droplets of their respiratory secretions come into contact with the mucous membranes of the mouth, nose, and possibly eyes of another person.

Because the virus in droplets can survive for 24 to 48 hours on hard non-porous surfaces, for 8 to 12 hours on cloth, paper and tissue, and for 5 minutes on hands, it can also be transmitted indirectly when people touch contaminated hands, surfaces, and objects.

What is the difference between avian influenza and Influenza Pandemic?

Avian influenza, or "bird flu", refers to a large group of different influenza viruses that primarily affect birds. On rare occasions, avian influenza viruses have mutated to infect humans. The H5N1 avian influenza virus that is currently circulating in Asia and parts of Europe has infected a small number of people who have been in close contact with infected birds. Although the H5N1 virus can cause serious illness in people, at this time it does not transmit easily from one human to another.

An influenza pandemic occurs when:

- A new influenza virus emerges for which the general population has little or no immunity;
- The new virus is able to infect humans and cause disease; and,
- The new virus is effectively transmitted from one human to another, thus leading to efficient human-to-human transmission of the virus causing community-wide outbreaks.

The first two prerequisites have been met by avian influenza H5N1.

Can you get avian influenza from eating chicken or other poultry?

No, not if the meat is fully cooked. Cooking kills influenza viruses in poultry, meat, and eggs.

The avian influenza virus can survive on raw meat from infected poultry. Proper hygiene - hand washing and the disinfecting of all surfaces that come in contact with raw poultry, meat, or eggs - is essential

Can mosquitoes transmit the influenza virus from birds to people like West Nile?

No, there is no evidence that the influenza virus can be transmitted by mosquitoes.

Protecting yourself from influenza

How can I protect myself and my family from an influenza pandemic?

If an influenza pandemic spreads to Ontario, you can reduce your risk by doing the same things you do to protect yourself and your family from seasonal influenza and other infections :

- Get your seasonal influenza shot every year – the flu shot will not

protect you from a Influenza Pandemic virus, but it will protect you from getting seasonal influenza, which could weaken your immune system or resistance to the Influenza Pandemic.

- Clean your hands thoroughly and often by washing your hands at a sink with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. [See below](#) for information on alternatives to alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your upper sleeve whenever you cough or sneeze. Do not cover your mouth and nose with your hand. Dispose of the tissue in the garbage, and then clean your hands by washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Keep alcohol-based sanitizer (gel or wipes) handy at work, home, or in the car for those situations where soap and water aren't available.
- Clean hard surfaces (e.g., kitchen worktops, door handles) frequently, using a normal cleaning product.
- Stay home if you are sick.
- Avoid non-essential travel and large crowds when there have been Influenza Pandemic cases in your community.
- Follow all instructions given by public health officials.

Should my faith group cancel all religious services/gatherings during an influenza pandemic?

When Influenza Pandemic arrives in Ontario, public health officials will consider a range of operations to contain the spread of influenza in their community (e.g., closing schools, discouraging public gatherings, etc.). However, these initiatives will be contemplated within the context of maintaining society's infrastructure and support systems. Moreover, any measures taken will be issued for only a specific, short period of time (i.e., not for the entire duration of the pandemic).

As a faith leader, you may want to consider what you can do to contain the spread of influenza in your facility during a pandemic. In addition to cleaning your facility and promoting hand hygiene/cough etiquette, you should space individuals at least 1 metre/3 feet apart during group gatherings. This could be accomplished by :

- Increasing the number religious services/gatherings and limiting the number of attendees at each service; or,
- Using audio-visual technology to broadcast the service to other rooms/buildings, thereby allowing your faith membership to split into smaller groups.

You also need to think about how you will encourage the ill to remain at home, including developing alternate supports to allow these individuals to worship on their own. Moreover, some members of your faith group will be concerned about attending large group gatherings during a pandemic, or they may have care giving duties that prevent them from leaving their home. You may want to use existing technology to communicate with those who are unable to attend services in person, such as the internet, telephone, phone messages, etc.

Will a vaccine be available during a pandemic?

A vaccine that gives good protection against a pandemic virus can only be developed after that virus strain appears. The Government of Canada has arrangements in place to develop a vaccine against a Influenza Pandemic virus as soon as such a virus emerges. It will take four to five months after the start of the pandemic to develop a vaccine.

My faith group practices veganism, meaning we don't consume meat, fish, dairy, or eggs. How is the vaccine for influenza produced and is it suitable for use by strict vegans?

Although work is ongoing to develop an influenza vaccine that isn't grown on eggs, the current influenza vaccine virus is grown on chicken eggs. Individuals who are averse to taking egg-based vaccines during a pandemic should discuss the risks with their family physician. This is also true for individuals with severe egg allergies, as the influenza vaccine may be contraindicated for these individuals.

What is hand hygiene?

Hand hygiene includes hand washing at a sink with soap and water

and/or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Practising good hand hygiene is the single most important thing we can all do to prevent the transmission of infection, including influenza.

You should practise hand hygiene on a regular basis, including during the following situations :

- After coughing or sneezing
- After blowing your nose and using facial tissue
- After using the washroom
- After touching any body fluids
- After changing diapers
- After shaking hands and touching shared surfaces or objects
- Before touching/eating food or drinking
- Before and after caring for the sick
- Whenever your hands are dirty

What is cough etiquette?

Cough etiquette includes covering your mouth and nose with a tissue or your upper sleeve/elbow whenever you cough or sneeze. Dispose of the tissue in the garbage, and then clean your hands by washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

The use of alcohol is prohibited for members of my faith group. Are there any alternatives to alcohol-based hand sanitizer?

The first alternative is washing your hands at a sink with soap and water. When a sink and/or running water is not available, hand hygiene products containing 2-4% chlorhexidine gluconate can be used as an alternative to alcohol-based hand sanitizer. (*Source : Infection Control Guidelines: Hand Washing, Cleaning, Disinfection and Sterilization in Health Care. Health Canada, Ottawa, 1998*).

However, these products have slower antimicrobial activity than alcohols and can contribute to dryness and skin irritation. As these products are not available in the local grocery or drug store, you will need to purchase

them at a medical supply store.

What special environmental cleaning procedures should my faith group use in order to prevent the spread of influenza pandemic at our facility?

During a pandemic, use the same cleaning products as normal to keep your facility free from germs and dirt. You will, however, need to increase the frequency of cleaning during a pandemic.

Here are some good environmental cleaning procedures that you should follow in your facility at all times:

- Use clean water, detergent, and a strong mechanical action (such as scrubbing) with a sufficient amount of contact time.
 - Pay special attention to frequently touched and horizontal surfaces - horizontal surfaces are important because when we cough or sneeze, large droplets can fall on horizontal surfaces.
 - If using a disinfectant, always follow the manufacturers' instructions.
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Preparing for an influenza pandemic

Why should my faith group prepare for an influenza pandemic?

Although pandemic planning is not easy, it is an important activity that all community-based organizations should undertake before an influenza pandemic arrives in Ontario. There are many good reasons why faith groups and faith-based service providers should start preparing for a pandemic now :

- Once an influenza pandemic virus arrives in Ontario, it will be more difficult to start planning;
- Members of the congregation will turn to faith group leaders for support and answers during a pandemic - by planning in advance, these leaders will be better prepared to give their support;
- Faith groups and faith-based service providers must minimize the

spread of infection by an influenza pandemic virus to protect the health of their faith leadership, staff, volunteers, and community members;

- Faith groups and faith-based services providers must make extra efforts to reach out and protect the vulnerable members of their community (e.g., homeless, elderly, physically or mentally ill, new immigrants to Canada, and others) who rely on them for basic necessities (e.g., medical care, food, shelter, mental health, social supports); and,
- Faith groups and faith-based service providers will be better able to support the response of the greater community in which they are located if they are prepared in advance.

Who can I contact to get help in developing an influenza pandemic plan for my faith group?

Your [local public health unit](#) is a good resource when making an influenza pandemic plan as they are the health lead for influenza pandemic planning in your jurisdiction.

My faith group wants to disseminate information on influenza pandemic to our community members. Has anyone created communication tools that can be used to educate the general public on influenza pandemic?

[Public health units](#) have created numerous communication tools on a variety of influenza-related topics that can be used to communicate with your congregation, including media releases, flyers, posters, and mass media campaigns.

For More Information

Call **ServiceOntario**, Infoline at 1-866-532-3161
(Toll-free in Ontario only)
TTY 1-800-387-5559. In Toronto, TTY 416-327-4282
Hours of operation : 8:30am - 5:00pm

If you are a member of the media, call Communications and Information

Branch at 416-314-6197 or visit our [News Room](#) section.

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