

Facts About Influenza and Influenza Pandemic

Influenza - The Flu

Influenza, or the “flu” is a common respiratory infection caused by a virus. Every year the flu virus causes outbreaks usually between November and April. Because the virus changes from year to year immunity to (or protection from) influenza does not last long.

Although colds and other viruses may cause similar symptoms, influenza strikes more quickly and people who get it feel sicker. About 20% of persons infected will not have any symptoms, or symptoms can be mild to severe. Often, if infected, very young children, people with some chronic medical conditions and the elderly are more likely than healthy older children or adults to get very sick. Some may need to be hospitalized. People over 65 years are at the greatest risk of dying from the flu.

Pandemic Influenza - How Is It Different?

Pandemic means wide-spread. The influenza virus is always changing and can develop into a new virus strain that is able to spread easily from person to person and spreads quickly around the world. Since people have no protection against the new virus, it will likely cause more illness and a larger number of deaths than the seasonal flu.

A pandemic may come and go in waves. Each wave can last for 6-8 weeks and occur 3-9 months apart. The second wave may be more severe than the first.

Influenza pandemic has happened every 10-40 years for at least the last 500 years. There were 3 influenza pandemics in the last century; the Hong Kong Flu (1968), the Asian Flu (1958) and the Spanish Flu (1918). No one can predict exactly when a pandemic will happen, but it may be soon.

For further information on pandemic influenza please go to the Public Health Agency of Canada at www.phac-afpc.gc.ca/influenza/pandemic.

How Influenza Is Spread

Influenza viruses are found in the nose and throat and are spread easily through coughing and sneezing and hands touching your eyes, mouth or nose. People who cough or sneeze into their hands and touch you with them may pass the virus on. In addition, any objects they touch will get contaminated as the virus survives on hard surfaces such as computer keyboards, furniture, door knobs, light switches. Others touching these surfaces pick up the virus on their hands and infect themselves.

The influenza virus in droplets can survive for 24-48 hours on hard non-porous surfaces, 8-12 hours on cloth, paper and tissue, and for 5 minutes on hands.

People with influenza are infectious and able to transmit the virus for up to 24 hours before symptoms appear. Adults are infectious for 3-5 days after symptoms appear while children are infectious for up to 7 days after symptoms appear. People with influenza tend to shed more virus in their respiratory secretions in the early stages of the illness. Viral shedding tends to last longer in infants, young children and people with weak immune systems.

How to Recognize Influenza

Infection with influenza can result in a wide range of symptoms that can appear suddenly. Some people experience no symptoms at all.

Symptoms may include:

- Sudden onset of fever, headache, chill, muscle aches, physical exhaustion (fatigue), and a dry cough.
- Onset of sore throat, stuffy or runny nose, and worsening cough.
- Children may also feel sick to their stomach, vomit or have diarrhea.
- Elderly and immune compromised people may not develop a fever.

Most healthy people recover from the flu without any serious problems, within 7-10 days. Fever and muscle aches usually last only 2-4 days, but coughing may go on for 1-2 weeks or more.

It is likely that you or a family member have influenza if the Timiskaming Health Unit has announced that Pandemic Influenza is circulating in our community and you have the following symptoms:

Sudden onset:

- fever (<38°C); AND
- cough; AND
- 1 or more of the following: sore throat, muscle aches, or fatigue and physical exhaustion.

It's important to confirm a fever by taking a person's temperature rather than by simply touching their forehead. Fever related to an illness is a sign that the body is fighting an infection. Ideally, a digital thermometer should be used for taking oral (mouth), auxiliary (under the armpit) or rectal (bum) temperatures. You can buy a thermometer at your drugstore.

You or your child have a fever if:

- The rectal (bum) temperature is 38.5°C (101.3°F) or higher.
- The oral (mouth)/tympanic (ear) temperature is 38°C (100.4°F) or higher.
- The auxiliary (under the armpit) temperature is 38°C (100.4°F) or higher.

For detailed information on taking your child's temperature refer to the fact sheet "**Fever and Temperature Taking - Guidelines for Children**" (R-302a-CDC).