

**H1N1 Influenza Virus
Question and Answers
May 11, 2009**

As of May 11, 2009 there have been 52 confirmed cases in Alberta and cases occurring in 24 countries worldwide. The majority of cases outside of Mexico, where the virus appears to have originated, have experienced mild symptoms with only a few requiring hospitalization.

For the most part, Canadian and Alberta cases of H1N1 influenza virus have been linked to Mexico travel; however, we are now seeing some cases with no travel connection and the travel link is becoming less significant.

The WHO raised the pandemic alert to Phase 5 on April 29, 2009. It's important to note, the phases of pandemic are based on the spread of the disease (phase 5 represents human-to-human spread in more than two countries), NOT the severity of illness.

In response to the increased alert, a central Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) between both Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health and Wellness was activated in Edmonton. Alberta Health Services also opened regional Emergency Coordination Centres (ECC) across the province to support a coordinated and timely response to the rapidly evolving global spread of H1N1 influenza virus and to provide a local point of contact for information.

1. What is H1N1 influenza virus?

The virus called H1N1 influenza virus is a new strain of Influenza A which can be transmitted from person to person. New strains of seasonal influenza A circulate every year in flu season.

2. How does influenza spread?

Person-to-person spread of this influenza virus is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal influenza and other respiratory infections. When the infected person coughs and sneezes, the viruses are released into the air where they can be breathed in by others. Viruses can also remain on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs, where they can be picked up on hands and spread when someone touches their eyes, mouth and/or nose.

3. What are the symptoms of H1N1 influenza virus in humans?

Symptoms of H1N1 influenza virus are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza infection. They include fever, cough, muscle aches, lethargy (exhausted, no energy), and lack of appetite. Some people with H1N1 influenza virus have also reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. The vast majority of Canadians with confirmed H1N1 influenza virus have recovered completely without the need for hospitalization.

The current outbreak in Mexico seems to be associated with pneumonia and other severe lung problems, as well as the milder forms of influenza.

4. Can you get H1N1 influenza virus from eating pork?

No - proper cooking of pork products will kill any viruses. Make sure pork is thoroughly cooked, not pink in the middle. Use a food thermometer to confirm pork has been heated through to 71 degrees Celsius (160 degrees Fahrenheit). Cooking pork properly kills all viruses, so cooked meat cannot spread swine flu to humans.

Additionally, swine (pigs) exhibiting symptoms of influenza would not enter the food market. Those handling raw pork should follow usual food hygiene practices. Federal and provincial health officials assure the public that properly handled and prepared pork is safe to eat. There is no risk of catching the virus from eating pork or pork products.

5. How is H1N1 influenza virus diagnosed?

If the doctor feels your symptoms could be due to influenza, a nose or throat swab may be done and sent to the lab for confirmation. People with mild symptoms generally do not require testing. Routine or seasonal influenza is quickly confirmed this way; H1N1 influenza virus diagnosis will take more time. Other tests such as blood work may also be ordered.

6. Will schools be closed in response to the H1N1 influenza virus outbreak?

The Public Health Agency of Canada has provided recommendations regarding the consideration of school closures in response to the current H1N1 influenza virus. In light of the goals for pandemic response in Canada (*to minimize serious illness and deaths and to minimize societal disruption among Canadians*) and given the current occurrence of illness similar to typical seasonal influenza, **the Public Health Agency of Canada is not recommending the closure of schools and daycare centres at this time.** This advice applies even if a confirmed case is identified in a school.

7. Has there been a travel advisory issued for people travelling to Mexico?

Yes. As of April 27, 2009, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is recommending that Canadians avoid any non-essential travel to Mexico. If travel to Mexico is unavoidable, PHAC advises Canadians make sure they receive

influenza vaccinations, wash their hands regularly, and avoid contact with people who appear to have a respiratory illness.

8. What do I do if I've been to Mexico or an affected area, or I've had contact with someone who was ill who returned from Mexico, and I have symptoms of a respiratory infection?

If you have recently been to Mexico or an affected area and have symptoms of a respiratory infection with a fever and a new cough, you should practise self-care and stay at home for 7 days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom free for 24 hours, whichever is longer.

In particular, rest and avoid contact with others until the symptoms have resolved.

For more information about self-care visit www.health.Alberta.ca/health-info/influenza-how-to-care.html or call Health Link Alberta toll-free 1-866-408-LINK (5465); in Edmonton, call 780-408-LINK (5465); in Calgary, call 403-943-LINK (5465). If your symptoms are severe or not improving, call your physician to request an appointment, and make sure to tell him/her about your travel history when making the appointment.

If the doctor sends you home, you should stay home until the symptoms have resolved. If you later become short of breath or develop other symptoms of severe illness, you should contact your physician or go to an Emergency Department and make sure you inform all healthcare workers of your travel history.

If you require Emergency Department care, immediately tell the triage nurse that you have respiratory symptoms and have recently traveled.

9. What if I have returned from travel:

(i) more than 7 days ago and have not been ill?

You are at no increased risk and no further action is required.

(ii) developed symptoms more than 7 days after having returned my return?

Your illness is likely locally acquired and you can continue with your usual self care measures.

10. What do we do if we have sick children/students attending school?

Sick children/students should be managed as usual, they should practice good hand washing and be taught to cover their cough / sneeze with their sleeve or arm. Children or staff with symptoms should stay home for at least 7 days from the start of symptoms, and if symptoms persist longer than 7 days, for 24 hours after symptoms resolve.

11. Does my child need a note from the doctor before he/she returns to school?

From a public health perspective, a note from the physician is not required for return to school following flu illness. Physicians and health care centers are working to capacity during this time and need to be available to see and care for ill patients.

12. Do students/staff need to wear masks in a room with sick children or staff?

No. Ill children and staff should remain at home and seek medical attention as necessary. Masks at school are not indicated at this time. Routine precautions to stop the spread of influenza are strongly recommended. This includes increased hand washing, covering your cough / sneeze with your sleeve and avoiding close contact with others if you have symptoms.

13. Where do we direct parents who are phoning the school / school division for more information?

Parents can call Health Link Alberta toll-free 1-866-408-LINK (5465); in Edmonton, call 780-408-LINK (5465); in Calgary, call 403-943-LINK (5465) for more information. They can also get more information regarding self-care at <http://www.health.Alberta.ca/health-info/influenza-how-to-care.html>.

14. Should field trips or sports events be cancelled at this time?

From a public health perspective, there is no reason for scheduled field trips or sports events to be cancelled at this time. It is reasonable to remind participants that they should stay at home if they are ill and not return until at least 7 days after their symptoms began or 24 hours after symptoms resolve if symptoms persist beyond 7 days.

15. What do staff at the schools need to do to prevent spread of H1N1 influenza virus in the daycare?

Schools should encourage and promote basic infection control practices. Hand washing is our best defence against disease. Staff should follow strict hand washing standards. Hand washing is the most effective way to control the spread of any germs including this influenza virus. It is also important to keep hands away from your face, and avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

16. When should staff wash their hands?

- Upon arrival at the workplace.
- Immediately before preparing, serving or eating food or drinks.
- After using the toilet or assisting a student to do so.
- After wiping your nose or a child's nose, coughing into your hand, or contact with blood or body fluids.
- Before going home and when you get home.

17. When should children / students wash their hands?

- Immediately before eating food or drinks.
- After using the toilet.
- After coughing or sneezing or touching their nose or mouth.
- After touching anything that could be a source of germs (e.g. shared toys, shared equipment, gym equipment).
- After gym class.
- Before they go home.

Staff should ensure children are washing their hands often and thoroughly. This can be achieved by role modelling appropriate hand washing and assisting children to clean their hands properly.

18. What should we use to wash our hands?

School staff and students need to have access to regular liquid soap in pump dispensers (antimicrobial or antibacterial soap is not required), running water and paper towels to dry hands. Hand sanitizers (60 – 90 per cent alcohol) can be used as an alternative as long as hands are not visibly soiled. Young children should be assisted when using hand sanitizers.

Follow these instructions when washing your hands with plain soap and water:

- Wet with warm water.
- Apply soap and scrub for 15 – 20 seconds – all surfaces including front and back of hands, between fingers, around nails (especially cuticles), thumbs and wrists. (Younger children can be encouraged to sing Happy Birthday or another short nursery rhyme to ensure they are washing their hands for the appropriate length of time).
- Rinse well.
- Dry with a paper towel.
- Use towel to turn off taps.

Follow these instructions when using a hand sanitizer:

- Apply enough product to your open palm that it takes 15 – 20 seconds of rubbing to dry.
- Rub into hands covering all surfaces including front and back of hands, between fingers, around nails (especially cuticles), thumbs and wrists.

19. What should we do with used tissues/Kleenex?

Tissues should be placed in the garbage immediately after use. The garbage should be in a location that is easily accessible. The garbage container should be lined with a plastic bag. The plastic bag should be removed and replaced when it is three-quarters full. The container should also be monitored to ensure the children are not reaching into it. Hands should always be cleaned after handling tissues and garbage.

20. Should people be wearing a mask if they have been in contact with someone who is ill with a respiratory illness? Where can I purchase masks if I want them?

The Public Health Agency of Canada does not recommend that members of the general public wear masks to protect against contracting H1N1 influenza virus. Evidence shows that this is not effective in preventing transmission of influenza in the general public. People often use masks incorrectly, or contaminate themselves when putting them on and taking them off, which could actually increase the risk of infection. The only exception is people who are ill with H1N1 influenza virus or people who are exhibiting flu-like symptoms in health care settings. In order to protect those in close contact, such as doctors, nurses, and caregivers at home, these people may be asked to wear a face mask.

Masks may be available from drug stores or medical supply companies. However, use of masks by the general public in community settings is not recommended.

21. Is there a vaccine to protect against H1N1 influenza virus?

Currently there is no vaccine to protect against H1N1 influenza Virus. The seasonal influenza immunization will not protect against H1N1 influenza virus.