

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Cases of influenza A(H1N1) 2009-09-18 08:15

This document is updated regularly.

Current situation

Following the worldwide outbreak of the new influenza A(H1N1) virus, public health authorities have set up monitoring activities to better understand this virus and its progress. Interventions have been adjusted based on the increase in infections in the world, the low severity of influenza A(H1N1) symptoms observed in Québec, and the knowledge gained through recent studies of the virus.

Thus, since May 15, 2009, Québec public health authorities have ceased to systematically track suspected and probable cases of influenza A(H1N1) in the community. Only cases requiring hospitalization are now investigated.

On June 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced they were moving to phase 6, in other words, a state of pandemic throughout the world. This was an expected decision because the virus was circulating in numerous countries, including Canada, and was spreading from person to person in the population.

Québec's public health authorities and health and social services institutions were mobilized as soon as the first cases appeared. Vigilance is being maintained and the necessary measures are being taken for both prevention and provision of care, in conformity with the Québec Pandemic Influenza Plan.

Influenza A(H1N1)

What is an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic is declared when a new influenza virus appears and circulates in several regions of the world, being transmitted from person to person constantly and readily. Influenza A(H1N1) is therefore the first influenza pandemic of the 21st century. In most cases, the symptoms of influenza A(H1N1) resemble those of seasonal influenza.

Is the influenza A(H1N1) virus the same as the A(H1N1) virus that normally circulates?

No. The new influenza A(H1N1) virus, which appeared in late April, is antigenically very different from the A(H1N1) viruses that circulate every year during the flu season. Accordingly, seasonal flu vaccines will probably not offer protection against the new virus.

Since the influenza A(H1N1) virus was initially associated with pigs, should contact with pigs be avoided?

Pigs can transmit influenza viruses to humans and vice-versa. Accordingly, persons with flu symptoms must avoid contact with pigs. However, few cases of human-swine or swine-human transmission of the A(H1N1) virus have been detected to date.

Can the influenza A(H1N1) virus be contracted by eating pork?

No, because the virus cannot survive cooking. Consuming pork and pork products that have been handled and cooked properly is completely safe.

Symptoms, transmission, treatment, and diagnosis of influenza A(H1N1)

What are the symptoms of influenza A(H1N1)?

The symptoms of influenza A(H1N1) are similar to those of seasonal flu: fever, coughing, fatigue, loss of appetite, headaches, and muscular aches. Certain people infected by the A(H1N1) virus will also experience runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Symptoms may vary from one person to another and, as with seasonal flu, complications may occur in those with underlying chronic conditions.

How is influenza A(H1N1) transmitted?

The influenza virus can be transmitted very easily via droplets from the nose and mouth of an infected person.

A person can contract influenza by touching his or her nose, mouth, or eyes after coming into contact with a contaminated surface or infected person. Symptoms emerge between one and seven days after contamination. Note that a patient can be contagious 24 hours before symptoms begin and up to 7 days after they end.

The influenza virus survives best in clean, dry surfaces. It spreads through close contact between persons, in circumstances such as living with other people, caring for a patient, using public transit, and attending cultural, sporting, or other public events.

How long can the A(H1N1) virus survive outside the body?

The virus can survive for some time on hard surfaces. However, it can be easily be destroyed by hand-washing with soap and warm water or with hand disinfectant. Household disinfectants destroy the virus on surfaces.

What are the incubation period and the contagious period for influenza A(H1N1)?

Influenza A(H1N1) symptoms develop between one and seven days after contamination. The patient can be contagious 24 hours before symptoms begin and up to 7 days after they end.

What should I do if I have flu symptoms?

People in good health normally recover on their own. People with influenza A(H1N1) should, as far as possible, stay home and rest until their symptoms end. Although influenza does not normally need to be treated with medication, non-prescription medications can be used to ease symptoms. To avoid infecting others, it is important to limit contact with family and friends until the end of symptoms.

Finally, standard [respiratory hygiene practices](#) also apply to people suffering from influenza:

- Cover your mouth and nose with a paper tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Throw the tissue in the garbage.
- If you don't have a paper tissue, cough or sneeze into the inside of your elbow or your upper arm.
- Wash your hands frequently. If you don't have access to soap and water, use an antiseptic hand wash.

When should I consult a health care professional if I have the flu?

In general, a health care professional should be consulted when a person with influenza symptoms, including fever, also presents:

- a risk of complications due to age (under 2 years or over 65 years) or a chronic illness;
- a risk of complications due to pregnancy;
- pain when breathing or difficulty breathing;
- vomiting for more than four hours;
- confusion or convulsions.

To make the best decisions for yourself and your loved ones, consult the leaflet [*Decision Chart*](#) and the pamphlet [*Influenza A\(H1N1\): What you need to know, what you need to do – Protecting yourself, protecting others.*](#)

What should I do if my child has flu symptoms?

Like adults, children in generally good health should recover easily from influenza. However, children may have different symptoms from adults, so stay alert.

It is important to call Info-Santé 8-1-1 or consult a doctor if your child has influenza A(H1N1) and:

- is under 2 years old and has a fever of over 38 °C (100.4 °F);
- has a chronic disease or is immune-suppressed and has a fever of over 38° C (100.4 ° F);
- seems very sick, listless, and difficult to awaken.

You should also make sure the child is comfortable and give appropriate medications according to his or her weight and the manufacturer's instructions.

Are certain groups at greater risk of contracting influenza A(H1N1)?

Unless they are in close and constant contact with people who already have influenza A(H1N1), there is no scientific data to suggest that there are particular groups of individuals who are at more risk of contracting influenza A(H1N1). However, certain people, such as pregnant women and people with chronic illnesses, are more vulnerable to complications that can accompany influenza A(H1N1), if they contract it.

What medications are used to treat influenza A(H1N1)?

Antivirals are used for the prevention and early treatment of influenza. If they are taken within 48 hours following the onset of the illness, they can attenuate its symptoms, reduce their duration, and possibly prevent complications. Antivirals are not vaccines, however, and cannot provide immunity from the virus.

How can I obtain antivirals?

Antivirals are not indicated for all patients. A physician will determine whether a patient needs antiviral treatment and which antiviral he or she will receive.

When will a vaccine be made available?

Work has already started on a vaccine against the strain responsible for influenza A(H1N1); it will probably be made available during the autumn. Enough vaccine for everyone in Canada will be produced.

Vaccination

Will there be enough vaccine for everyone?

The government of Canada, on behalf of the provinces and territories, has announced an order for 50.4 million doses of the influenza A(H1N1) vaccine for the people of Canada. Québec has made sure it will have enough doses of vaccine to immunize everyone who needs or wants this protection from the virus.

Who will be vaccinated and how will doses be distributed among the population?

Everyone who needs or wants this protection from the A(H1N1) virus will be provided with it. When the first doses become available, they will be offered in priority to the most vulnerable:

- pregnant women;
- chronically ill people under 65 years old;
- children between 6 months and 5 years old;
- people living in remote or isolated locations or communities;
- health care workers;
- people living with people at high risk who cannot be immunized (babies under 6 months old and immune-compromised people).

Note that vaccination is voluntary. Everyone will have access to immunization, and the nature of the program in Québec will be made public soon.

Will vaccination be free for all Quebecers?

Québec has set up a program for influenza A(H1N1) immunization clinics, ensuring that the vaccine will be free for all Quebecers.

Is the Québec government prepared to manage mass vaccination if necessary?

A provincial plan for fighting the pandemic, including voluntary vaccination for the entire population, can be deployed at any time if the relevant authorities determine that it is necessary. In this case, the population will be informed of the actions taken in the health care network and what to do to facilitate the process.

Prevention

How can infection with the influenza virus be prevented?

Hygiene and prevention practices should be applied at all times and situations to prevent propagation of the virus. Washing hands with soap and water and coughing and sneezing into a tissue, the inside of the elbow or the upper arm instead of the hands are simple and easy-to-practise preventive measures.

Should I take additional measures, such as wearing a surgical mask, to avoid contracting influenza A(H1N1)?

At present, Canadian government authorities are not advising the population at large to wear masks to protect against influenza A(H1N1). This measure has not yet been proven to be effective in avoiding influenza transmission. People often wear masks improperly or contaminate them when donning or removing them, actually increasing the risks of contamination. Only people who are ill should wear masks when they are with others, to avoid infecting them.

Information for travellers

What measures have government authorities taken with regard to travellers arriving in Canada who may be contaminated with the influenza A(H1N1) virus currently circulating in Québec?

All international travellers arriving in Canada by all routes (air, road, rail, or sea) are visually inspected, notably for their state of health. This measure is not specific to influenza A(H1N1) control.

Are there still advisories in place for business and personal travel to Mexico?

Since the latest data from Mexico indicate that the risk of contracting the A(H1N1) virus there is decreasing, and since nearly all cases in Canada and the United States have been benign, on May 18, 2009 the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) ended its advisory that Canadians should postpone non-essential travel to Mexico.

Should those travelling to Mexico be vaccinated for seasonal influenza?

No. However, those travelling to Mexico or elsewhere should consult a travel health clinic to find out if seasonal influenza is still present at their destination.

How can travellers in a foreign country find a physician in case of illness?

If emergency care is needed, the best solution is most often to go to the nearest hospital. Also, major tourist hotels often have physicians who can provide medical care to their guests or can set up appointments with local physicians.

A list of physicians and hospitals in Mexico is available on the website of the Canadian Embassy to Mexico at the following address: [www.canadainternational.gc.ca/mexico-mexique/emergerg-urgence/med.aspx].

To find out more

- For any **general information** on influenza A(H1N1), contact **Services Québec**, 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., 7 days a week , at **1 877 644-4545**.
- Also, visit the **government's Pandémie Québec website**: [www.pandemiequebec.gouv.qc.ca]. This site contains all useful information for the population and health and social services personnel.
- For any questions about a person's **physical health**, contact **Info-Santé** at **8-1-1**.
- For all questions on swine flu (in swine), visit the following websites: [www.mapaq.gouv.qc.ca] and [www.inspection.qc.ca].