



## **Influenza Backgrounder**

### **What is Influenza?**

Influenza (flu) is a common and highly contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus. Various strains of virus circulate throughout the world year round. In Canada, the flu season usually runs from November to April and affects 10-25% of Canadians each year.

Influenza typically starts with headache, chills and cough. These symptoms are followed rapidly by fever ranging from 38 C - 41 C (102F-105F), loss of appetite, muscle aches, fatigue, runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes, and throat irritation. Children may have nausea, vomiting and diarrhea but these symptoms are uncommon in adults. Symptoms of influenza generally last a week to ten days. However, it can last for up to one month.

### **How is it spread?**

People are contagious just before they develop symptoms. Adults remain infectious and they can spread the virus to others for about 6 days. Children can remain infectious for up to 10 days.

Influenza is spread through droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes into the air. You can get the flu by breathing in these droplets through your nose or mouth, or by the droplets landing directly on your eyes. The flu virus is also found on the hands of people with the flu and on surfaces, they have touched. It can survive outside the body on unwashed hands for 5 minutes, on tissues or clothing for 8-10 hours and on hard surfaces, such as tables and telephones, for 2 days.

You can become infected if you shake hands with an infected person or touch a contaminated surface and transfer the virus to your own eyes, nose or mouth.

### **What precautions should you take?**

- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water to prevent both picking up and spreading the virus. Hand washing, when done correctly, is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.
- Get the flu shot (vaccination). It is not too late to be vaccinated although it takes 2 weeks for the vaccine to become effective.

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## What should you do if you get the flu?

- Resting will provide comfort and allow your body to use its energy to fight the infection. You will probably feel very weak and tired until your temperature returns to normal.
- Drink plenty of fluids. They are needed to replace lost fluids because of fever. Warm liquids can help loosen mucus.
- Practice cough etiquette:
  - If you sneeze, blow your nose or cough use a tissue to smother it and immediately dispose of the tissue and wash your hands. The force of sneezing into a tissue will still allow the virus to pass through the tissue onto your hands. Tissues are for single use only, which means one sneeze, cough or nose blow only and then throw it out. If a sneeze or cough is coming and you do not have a tissue, turn your face into your shoulder or elbow. This is referred to as a “guarded” sneeze and forces the germs into your sleeve or clothing and not out into the environment where other people are exposed.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water especially when coughing and sneezing to decrease the spread of droplets to surfaces.
- If you are ill, stay home to avoid spreading the influenza virus to others. If you continue to work and socialize, you can spread the virus to others who then become ill and spread the virus to their family and friends, who in turn pass it on to others. The circle of infection can repeat over and over.
- Do not visit friends or relatives in a hospital or long-term care facility if you have the flu.
- Do your best to avoid infants, people over 65 and individuals with chronic health problems because they are more susceptible to serious complications of influenza.