

Swine Flu Outbreak

Tip Sheet for Employees

Swine influenza A H1N1 (swine flu) has recently made headlines. You may have heard that the infection is spreading and although public health agencies have been able to disseminate information about the situation in a timely way, you may have some unanswered questions. People are concerned about travelling; healthcare workers are concerned about the risk they may be facing; some people have even taken to wearing facemasks to protect themselves. Needless to say, the atmosphere is ripe for heightened anxiety to take hold, what can you do to remain calm?

These Frequently Asked Questions and answers may help you better understand and cope with this recent news:

Q: What is the swine flu and how is it spread?

A: Swine flu is a specific kind of influenza A virus that can cause respiratory illness in humans. All influenza viruses are spread through droplets in an infected person's mucous. The droplets are most commonly transferred when the infected person sneezes or coughs.

Q: How do I know if I have the swine flu?

A: In Canada, very few cases of swine flu have been reported. The symptoms are the same as other strains of flu (fever, fatigue, lack of appetite and coughing). If you have been to Mexico since the beginning of April and are experiencing flu-like symptoms, see your doctor. Tests can determine if you have the swine flu virus.

If you are experiencing any flu-like symptoms, even if you haven't been to Mexico, stay at home. Minimizing your contact with others is an important factor to keeping everyone healthy, regardless of the type of virus.

Q: What can I do to stay healthy?

A: Since influenza is spread through person-to-person contact, frequent and proper hand washing is the most effective way to protect yourself. It is also important to sneeze and cough into your sleeve (the inside of your elbow) or a tissue. Be sure to dispose of the tissue in a garbage receptacle after each use.

Q: How long does the virus live outside the body?

A: It has not been confirmed how long this strain of influenza can live outside the body (e.g. on doorknobs, telephones and keyboards). However, most influenza strains can survive up to 8 hours on most surfaces.

Q: I'm anxious about the safety of my family and feel worried about this situation. What should I do?

A: When you are worried, remind yourself of the facts. Stay up to date on the latest information from your local/municipal public health department, your provincial health ministry, Health Canada and the World Health Organization. Each of these organizations provides information and resources on their website.

Q: Everything that I am seeing on TV and in the media is stressing me out. How can I cope?

A: Find ways to “de-stress” by: exercising; practicing meditation or yoga, or engaging in other relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing exercises. Also, share your feelings with a friend, relative or an EAP counsellor.

Q: What should I do if I have recently travelled to the affected areas in Mexico and the United States?

A: People with a travel history to Mexico and the United States who experience severe respiratory illness or influenza-like illness should consult their public health provider and recount their travel history.

Other recommendations for travellers include:

Wash your hands

- By washing your hands with soap under warm running water, you will reduce your chance of getting the flu.
- Alcohol-based hand gel can also be used if soap and water are not readily available. Be sure to use products that contain more than 60% alcohol for full effectiveness. It's a good idea to keep some with you in your pocket or purse when you travel.

Practice proper cough and sneeze etiquette

- Cover your mouth and/or nose to reduce the spread of germs. Remember to wash your hands afterwards and dispose of tissues once used.

Try to avoid close contact with sick people

- Cover your mouth and nose to reduce the spread of germs. Remember to wash your hands afterwards.

Monitor your health

- If you develop flu-like symptoms when you return home, you should see a seek medical attention immediately
- Tell the health care provider who sees you that you have been travelling to areas affected by swine flu.

Q: I have not recently been to the affected areas in Mexico and the U.S., what precautions can I take to protect myself?

A: As with seasonal flu, basic infection control methods are the best precautions/measures that people can take to avoid getting infected. These methods include hand washing and keeping surfaces clean.

Proper Hand Washing Technique

1. Wet your hands with warm running water.
2. Add soap, and then rub your hands together, making a soapy lather. Do this away from the running water for at least 15 seconds, being careful not to wash the lather away. Wash the front and back of your hands, as well as between your fingers and under your nails.
3. Rinse your hands well under warm running water.
4. Pat hands dry with a paper towel or clean towel at home.
5. Turn off water using same paper towel and dispose in a proper receptacle. At home, be sure to change your hand towels regularly.