



Information about the New H1N1 Influenza Virus

Dear Parent / Guardian and Staff Members:

June 11, 2009

Since April, 2009, health units in Middlesex-London, Oxford and Elgin have been working in partnership with the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and other health agencies to monitor the new H1N1 influenza virus. Since it was first identified, the virus has been found in many countries around the world as well as in many parts of Ontario. Based on several laboratory-confirmed cases, there is evidence of limited spread of the new virus in some of our communities. To date, this has not resulted in an increased demand on the health care system.

Today the World Health Organization declared this situation to be a pandemic, because of the worldwide spread of this new strain of influenza. This letter provides you with information to help your family understand and respond to this evolving situation.

What is the new H1N1 influenza virus?

The new H1N1 influenza virus can cause a respiratory illness with symptoms similar to those of regular seasonal influenza, which are:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Weakness or fatigue
- Muscle aches or joint pain
- Headache
- Diarrhea and vomiting in some cases, particularly in children.

While the new H1N1 influenza virus is generally causing mild illness that lasts about four days, in a few cases serious illness has occurred.

What makes the new H1N1 influenza virus different from regular seasonal influenza?

- The new virus has continued to spread through the spring, when regular seasonal influenza usually does not. This is likely happening because this is a new form of the influenza virus and most people do not have immunity (protection) against it. There is a possibility that the virus will continue to circulate through the summer and into the fall, and could therefore result in more people becoming sick.
- Unlike regular seasonal influenza, which more often causes serious illness in the elderly, the few people who have developed serious illness from the new H1N1 influenza virus have tended to be younger. Some, but not all, of these individuals had underlying medical conditions.

What does the World Health Organization's declaration of a pandemic mean in our communities?

The declaration of a pandemic does not change the local situation or the current response. Local health units have been preparing for a pandemic for many years. This has included working with community partners to plan for health care delivery should a significant number of people become ill, as well as preparing to provide vaccinations against a pandemic influenza virus once a vaccine becomes available. Enhanced health care services will be implemented when they are needed in each community based on the number of people who become ill.

How does the new H1N1 influenza virus spread?

The virus appears to be spread from person to person in the same way as regular seasonal influenza and like seasonal influenza, the new H1N1 influenza virus has been shown to spread in schools. Spread occurs when droplets from a cough or sneeze are released into the air and then breathed in by others who are less than six (6) feet away. The virus can also spread when a person touches objects that have droplets from an ill person on their surfaces. The virus can live on these surfaces for up to 48 hours. Touching objects with the virus on them and then touching the eyes, nose or mouth can result in the spread of infection. It should be noted that the virus can easily be removed from hands by washing them with warm water and pump soap, or by using a hand sanitizer. Household disinfectants can remove the virus from surfaces.

What precautions can be taken at home and school to limit the spread of the new H1N1 influenza virus?

1. Wash your hands often using warm water and pump soap or a hand sanitizer. Ensure hands are washed:
 - After coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose;
 - After shaking hands;
 - Before eating;
 - Before putting in contact lenses; and
 - Before touching your face.
2. Avoid touching your face as much as possible.
3. Cough and sneeze into a tissue or your elbow. Throw out used tissues right away.
4. Do not share objects that have been in other people's mouths, such as toothbrushes, drinks and water bottles, unwashed utensils, cigarettes, lip products, and unwashed musical instrument mouthpieces.
5. Stay home if you feel sick. People who have symptoms of influenza should stay home until their fever is gone and they are feeling better. This will help limit the spread of infection in the school and community.
6. Frequently clean commonly touched surfaces such as keyboards, doorknobs, countertops, etc.

What should I do if someone in my family becomes ill?

People who have symptoms of influenza should stay home until their fever is gone and they are feeling better. If you are a health care provider who is ill, you should stay home at least seven days from the onset of your symptoms; after which, you can return to work when your fever is gone and you are feeling better.

If you have concerns about a person who is ill, call your health care provider or Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000. People should contact their health care provider if they develop influenza symptoms and have any of the following: underlying medical conditions, are pregnant, are under 2 years of age or are 65 years of age and older. For more information, please see the "Caring for People with Influenza at Home" fact sheet available at www.healthunit.com/caringforpeopleathome.aspx.

What else can be done to prepare for the new H1N1 influenza virus?

It is very difficult to predict what will happen with the new H1N1 influenza virus over the summer and into the fall. If necessary, public health officials may consider closing schools to limit the spread of influenza in the community. Limiting community spread will allow the health care system to more effectively provide care for those who are ill. Parents are asked to develop childcare plans in case the decision is made to close schools, recognizing that childcare centres may also be closed.

For additional information, please contact your local health unit:

- Middlesex-London Health Unit: 519-663-5317 ext. 2330; www.healthunit.com
- Elgin St. Thomas Public Health: 519-631-9900; www.elginhealth.on.ca
- Oxford County Public Health and Emergency Services: 519-519-539-9800 ext. 3406; www.oxfordcounty.ca/publichealth