H1N1 Pandemic Information

The H1N1 influenza virus is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of the seasonal flu (fever, runny nose, sore throat, cough, body aches, fatigue and loss of appetite). General infection control measures and good hygiene can help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including the H1N1 influenza virus. There is currently a number of confirmed H1N1 influenza virus cases in Alberta including Government of Alberta employees. This means that all employees should be aware of the potential for the presence of the H1N1 influenza virus and take the appropriate steps to prevent the possible spread of the H1N1 influenza virus.

As with any influenza virus, staff that exhibit flu-like symptoms are expected to stay home until the symptoms disappear. Symptoms of H1N1 Influenza in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza infection. They include fever, cough, muscle aches, lethargy, and lack of appetite. Some people with H1N1 Influenza have also reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

Alberta Health and Wellness is advising Albertans who exhibit symptoms of a respiratory infection with a fever greater than 38 C and a cough, to stay at home and practice self-care. In particular, rest and avoid contact with others until your symptoms have gone away.

Alberta Health Services is concerned about overloading community health services and only recommend that if symptoms are severe or not improving, you should call your health care provider to request an appointment. If your symptoms are severe or not improving, call your health care provider to request an appointment, and make sure to tell him/her about the symptoms you are experiencing when making the appointment. If your health care provider sends you home, you should stay at home for seven days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer.

All strains of influenza can be dangerous; however, the following precautions as advised by Alberta Health and Wellness are considered effective public health measures to prevent the spread of influenza and are highly recommended:

- Hand hygiene, wash hands frequently and thoroughly using soap and water, especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose. When soap and water are not available, hand sanitizers are an excellent choice to use if hands are not visibly dirty.
- Respiratory etiquette, cough and/or sneeze into your sleeve/arm rather than your hand.
- Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth after shaking hands or touching hard surfaces like counters and door handles or other surfaces that may harbour influenza and other viruses.
- If ill with flu like symptoms stay home from work and avoid public places unless directed to seek medical care.
- Social distancing, keeping at least an arm’s length distance from others.
- Keep commonly used surfaces such as telephone, keyboard, and desk top clean and sanitized. Use a regular disinfectant cleaning product.

You may want to refer to Alberta Health and Wellness’ website at: http://www.health.alberta.ca/health-info/influenza-H1N1.html, or Alberta Health Services website at: http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/13039.htm for more H1N1 information.
H1N1 Questions and Answers:

Q: The World Health Organization (WHO) declared H1N1 Influenza a pandemic. What does this mean?

A: The WHO has 6 health regions including: the Americas, Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Africa’s, South East Asia and the Western Pacific.

First, it is important to understand that influenza continuously circulates among animals especially birds. WHO has six phases of pandemic alert;

**Phase 1**, no viruses circulating among animals have been reported to cause infections in humans.

**Phase 2**, an animal influenza virus circulating among domesticated or wild animals is known to have caused infection in humans, and is therefore considered a potential pandemic threat.

**Phase 3**, an animal or human-animal influenza virus has caused sporadic cases or small clusters of disease in people, but has not resulted in human-to-human transmission sufficient to sustain community-level outbreaks.

**Phase 4**, is characterized by verified human-to-human transmission of an animal or human-animal influenza virus able to cause community-level outbreaks.

**Phase 5**, is characterized by human-to-human spread of the virus into at least two countries in one WHO region.

**Phase 6**, the pandemic phase, is characterized by community level outbreaks in at least two countries within one region and one other country in a different WHO region.

Q: What does the WHO declaration mean for Alberta?

A: This declaration does not change the level of preparedness or measures currently being taken in the province. The WHO pandemic alert phases are not indicative of how severe this disease is. Phase 6 is a measure of where and how widespread this new virus has gone around the world. Since risk is normally based on both frequency and severity of cases, the risk in Alberta remains low.

The spread and severity of influenza cases in Alberta will continue to be monitored and everyone is encouraged to continue practicing infection preventative measures.

Q: When will we know that a pandemic has been declared in Alberta?

A: There are trigger points that Alberta Health and Wellness is monitoring, once those trigger points have been reached and it is appropriate to declare a pandemic emergency Alberta’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Andre Corriveau, will make that declaration.
Q. I am a supervisor and I have a staff member who has influenza illness, what do I need to do?

A: The employer is legally bound to maintain confidentiality of the employee’s medical information. Alberta Health and Wellness does not recommend creating concern and potential panic with others when there are so many factors that influence exposure. Supervisors are encouraged to communicate with their staff; a general update can acknowledge the presence of flu-like symptoms or a report of the H1N1 influenza virus in the workplace. However, it is important to remember that the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act applies to the release of all personal information. Supervisors may want to inform the ill staff member that a general information update will be provided to his/her immediate co-workers.

Supervisors should also encourage staff to take the necessary precautions to prevent the spread of the virus and to stay home if they begin to exhibit flu-like symptoms.

Q. As a supervisor what proof of illness should I request from my employee that stays home during the flu season (in this a pandemic year) and explains it is because of flu-like illness?

A: For general illness absences (in excess of 3 consecutive work days) the normal expectation is that the employee submits a doctor’s certificate for the period of their absence upon their return. However, as this is a pandemic year the increased demand on our health care system responding to seasonal flu cases and H1N1 pandemic influenza cases will increase the risk of crisis in our health care system.

In consultation with the Chief Medical Officer of Health, it has been determined that one of the ways to minimize the risk of a crisis in our health care system ahead of the next wave of the pandemic influenza is to lessen the need for people to see a physician.

As a result, on the recommendation of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, the Government of Alberta as the employer will relax requirements for medical notes when the stated reason for having stayed home is due to flu-like illness. The use of a statutory declaration as an alternative would be acceptable during the 2009-2010 flu season.

Q. I am concerned about working with a co-worker who was confirmed to have had H1N1 influenza.

A. While your concern is understandable, the Government of Alberta is committed to practices that support minimizing the opportunity for H1N1 influenza to spread in the work environment.

The expectation is that no worker shall return to work until they have been symptom free for 24 hours and as such they are no longer contagious.

Affected work area surfaces and work stations are to be properly sanitized with disinfectant to control spread of the virus.
Q. In order to control the spread of the virus, does the building cleaning service provide a thorough cleaning and sanitizing of potentially contaminated work surfaces in this employee's office and common working area?

A: Alberta Infrastructure's standard custodial specification meets the Workplace Cleaning and Environmental Decontamination standards outlined in the Best Practice Guideline for Workplace Health and Safety during Pandemic Influenza. This includes, but is not limited to: daily cleaning for door handles and door push plates, water fountains, elevators and washrooms and tables and counter tops in common areas.

Cleaning of equipment, machines and tools used in GoA business operations is the responsibility of the business unit. This includes cleaning for individual and shared workstations. Inquiries for procedures and protocols and any special requests should be first expressed to the Department Occupational Health and Safety Committee to determine what controls or processes are appropriate, relevant and required.

Alberta Infrastructure is also installing and maintaining hand sanitizer stations in common areas in all buildings where Government of Alberta employees work.

Q. Does the imminent danger section of the Occupational Health and Safety Act apply pre-pandemic or during a pandemic?

A. As per section 35 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, prepandemic or pandemic periods would not be considered imminent danger.

There are two considerations for determining imminent danger. The first is whether a hazard is dangerous and would likely cause an injury or put a worker’s life at risk. The second is whether the hazard is normal for that occupation. In the case of a co-worker with the H1N1 influenza, these considerations do not apply. While a potential exposure exists, illness may or may not ensue. Workers who are concerned with any uncontrolled hazards should discuss with the employer the steps to be taken to effectively control the hazard. When dealing with workplace hazards, employers have the obligation to take effective steps to minimize worker exposure to the health and safety hazards. During a potential pandemic situation, the danger of contracting the flu becomes normal to all occupations.

Q: Should we be restricting travel to Government of Alberta employees?

A: No, travelers are able to maintain awareness of current travel advisories to other countries through the Public Health Agency of Canada Travel Advisory link; http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/index-eng.php