

February 2010

Caring for Yourself and Others with Influenza (the Flu)

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Flu symptoms usually appear suddenly and can include cough and a fever, sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain and exhaustion.

Children may also feel sick to their stomach, vomit or have diarrhea. Elderly people, young children and people with lowered immunity may not have a fever.

Not everyone who gets the flu develops symptoms but they still may be able to spread it to others, especially if they cough or sneeze. It's important for all people to practice proper cough and sneeze etiquette, whether or not they feel ill.

What basic precautions should people with the flu take?

If you have flu symptoms:

- Stay home from school or work and limit contact with others while you are sick.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or sleeve or use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth. Place the tissue in the garbage immediately.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. When soap and water are not available and your hands aren't visibly soiled, hand sanitizers may be an acceptable alternative.
- Limit touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

Do household members or caregivers of people with the flu need to take any precautions?

If you are a household member or caregiver of someone with the flu, you should:

- Wash your hands after being in contact with the person who is sick.
- Wash your hands and a child's hands after wiping a child's nose.
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing or wiping your nose.
- Wash your hands after touching objects handled by someone who has the flu.
- Clean surfaces (such as toys, bathroom taps and doorknobs) with household cleaners, especially after an ill person has touched them.
- Take care of yourself and your family by maintaining a healthy balanced diet, being active, avoiding cigarette smoke and other harmful substances and getting enough rest and sleep.

Getting a flu shot can also help to reduce your risk of catching the flu. Talk to your health care provider or call **Health Links-Info Santé** at **788-8200** or **1-888-315-9257** to find out more.

How do I find out if someone has a fever?

Fever is a sign that the body is fighting an infection or other illness. A person has a fever if their body temperature is 38°C (100.4°F) or higher.

Touching a forehead or neck is not a reliable way to check if someone has a fever. The best way to measure a person's temperature is by using a digital thermometer placed in the mouth (oral), the ear (tympanic) or under the armpit (axillary). The use of glass mercury thermometers is not recommended. You can buy a digital thermometer at your drug store.

What can I do at home to treat a fever?

- Dress in lightweight clothing and keep the room temperature around 20°C (68°F).
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Offer small, nutritious meals.
- Take acetaminophen (ex: Tylenol®, Tempra®). Use the dose and schedule recommended on the package or by your doctor or pharmacist. Ibuprofen (ex: Advil®, Motrin®,) may be used for children older than six months and for adults.
- Do not give acetylsalicylic acid, also known as ASA, (ex: Aspirin®,) to anyone under 18 years of age because it can lead to brain and liver damage (Reye's Syndrome).

How can I treat other flu symptoms?

- Get plenty of rest.
- Gargle with warm salt water if you have a sore throat.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to help with a stuffy nose.

When should I seek medical care for someone with the flu?

The decision to seek medical care will be affected by factors such as age, existing health problems or the symptoms a person is experiencing at the time.

People who may be at risk for severe illness should contact their health care provider early if they have flu symptoms, including:

- people with a chronic medical condition (ex. heart or lung disease, diabetes etc.)
- people 65 years and older and others who may be frail, have mobility problems or live alone
- people with weakened immune systems
- people with other risks such as alcoholism
- pregnant women

Children under five, people of Aboriginal ancestry, disadvantaged populations (ex: homeless), people living in remote or isolated areas, and those with other risks such as severe obesity may also be at increased risk for severe illness from some types of flu (ex: H1N1).

People who are normally healthy and have symptoms of the flu should seek medical attention as soon as possible, if they experience any of the following:

- difficult or painful breathing
- coughing up bloody sputum (phlegm or saliva)
- wheezing
- fever for three to four days that is not getting better or is getting worse
- sudden return of high fever and other symptoms after initial improvement
- extreme ear pain

People who have difficulty breathing or are believed to be severely ill, dehydrated, extremely drowsy or confused should seek immediate medical attention by going to the nearest hospital emergency department or calling 911.

Is there anything else I can do?

Even mild illness can be stressful for both the person who is ill and those who care for them. If you are caring for someone with the flu it is important to remember to take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings and continue to do things you enjoy and find relaxing.

Being prepared may also help to alleviate any added stress caused by illness.

Preparing a home flu kit can help to ensure that you are ready to care for someone if they become ill. Make sure you have the following items in your home:

- digital thermometer
- ibuprofen (ex: Advil®) or acetaminophen (ex: Tylenol® or Tempra®) - do not give ASA (ex: Aspirin®) to children and teens
- facial tissues
- soap and water

Developing a support plan with friends and family can also enhance your ability to care for someone who is ill. For example, plan for someone to look after you or your children if you are ill and offer to provide others with the same support. You should also identify family members, friends or neighbours who may be living alone and call them regularly to see if they need help dealing with the flu.

Where can I get more information?

For more information on the flu, please visit manitoba.ca, contact your health care provider or call **Health Links-Info Santé** at **788-8200** or **1-888-315-9257**.

For information on caring for a child with the flu, please see the fact sheets:

Caring for a Child with the Flu and ***Caring for a Child with a Fever***