

Seasonal Influenza

FACTS FOR Health Care Worker, Patients and Families

What is Influenza?

Influenza (commonly known as “the flu”) is a potentially serious infectious respiratory illness that begins in the nose and throat and is caused by a virus. It is highly contagious and results in approximately 12,200 hospitalizations and, on average 3,500 deaths in Canada each year. It is not a stomach or intestinal illness.

Those more likely to become ill include young children and adults with chronic medical conditions, such as cancer, cardiac and respiratory disorders, and people who are obese. Pregnant women, indigenous people, those who are immune compromised and anyone living in long term care, group homes or an assisted living environment are at risk.

Signs and Symptoms of Influenza

Symptoms can vary from person to person with influenza producing similar but more severe symptoms than the “common cold”. Early symptoms of influenza typically begin with headache, chills and a cough progressing quickly to fever, muscles aches and pains, loss of appetite, runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes, sore throat and chest discomfort. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may also occur especially in children. The elderly and those who are immune compromised may not necessarily mount a fever.

Complications can include pneumonia (bacterial and viral), ear and sinus infections, dehydration and worsening of chronic medical conditions such as heart and kidney failure, bronchitis, asthma and diabetes.

Incubation period for Influenza

The incubation period of seasonal influenza is usually 1 to 4 days with the period of communicability being 24 hours before onset of symptoms to 3-5 days after onset of symptoms.

Diagnosis:

If the patient is going to be admitted to hospital consideration should be given to ordering a nasopharyngeal swab to confirm diagnosis. Once it has been established that seasonal influenza is circulating in any given community, testing of out-patients is generally abandoned and patients are treated based on symptoms.

How is it spread?

Influenza is primarily transmitted by droplets spread through coughing or sneezing and may also be transmitted through direct or indirect contact with contaminated respiratory secretions. People infected with influenza can spread it to others before they know they are ill. Some people can be infected and have no symptoms but can still spread the

disease to other people. Children and people with weakened immune systems may be infectious longer.

Treatment

Generally for an otherwise healthy individual, treatment is supportive (Tylenol, Decongestants), especially in mild cases as severity of the illness varies. In cases where symptoms are significant, the course and severity of the illness **may be** reduced with early onset of symptoms (within the first 48hrs of treatment with Tamiflu).

Prevention of Transmission

Immunized HCWs with documented vaccination at least 2 weeks prior may continue to work during an influenza outbreak. Unvaccinated HCWs have the potential to acquire or transmit influenza A or B virus. Antiviral prophylaxis must be offered to unvaccinated HCWs working in the area or unit affected by an outbreak. The HCW may resume work as soon as antiviral prophylaxis is started.

If influenza is suspected or diagnosed, the HCW must remain off work until the period of peak symptoms and the period of communicability (5 days from onset) has passed.

HCWs should report to OHS prior to return to work.

It is crucial to ensure compliance with respiratory etiquette, cleaning shared equipment between patients cleaning high touch surfaces in the environment as well as frequent and meticulous hand hygiene after all contact with the patient and the patient environment.

References:

GOV, (2020). Canadian Immunization Guide. Canadian Pandemic Influenza Preparedness: Planning Guidance for the Health Sector (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/canadian-immunization-guide.html>

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More Questions?

This fact sheet provides basic general information only and is to be used as a quick guide, not as a complete resource on the subject. If you have any further questions, ask a physician, local Health Unit or Infection Control at X 2361. Updated September 2020.