

November 25, 2009 -- 3:30 a.m.

Nova Scotia Government H1N1 (human swine influenza) Pandemic Q&A

Dear Colleagues:

As most of you are aware, the seasonal flu clinics were canceled a few weeks ago. Last week Dr. Strang asked the PSC to prepare for the H1N1 flu vaccine to be delivered to government employees before the seasonal flu.

The process to do this has begun, using the same system used to deliver the seasonal flu vaccine in the past several years for government employees. The clinics are being arranged now by your OH&S specialist for dates in November.

This is for the H1N1 flu, not the seasonal flu vaccine. Seasonal flu clinics will be announced at a later date.

If you have any questions, Brian Carter would be happy to answer them and can be reached at 478-2611.

Regards,

Rosalind Penfound
Commissioner

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Q) 1. How do you get H1N1?

A) The virus, generally contained in droplets, can be propelled approximately 2 metres when an individual with pandemic influenza coughs or sneezes. It can live on hard surfaces, such as stainless steel and plastic for 24 to 48 hours and on soft surfaces, such as cloth, tissue, and paper for 8 to 12 hours; and on hands for five minutes; however, it can only infect a person for up to 2 to 8 hours after being deposited on hard surfaces, and for up to a few minutes after being deposited on soft surfaces.

Q) 2. How long are you contagious from H1N1?

A) Individuals may be contagious up to seven days after the onset of symptoms in uncomplicated cases. Individuals are most infectious when they have symptoms.

Q) 3. How do I protect myself and others from exposure to H1N1?

- A)
1. Stay at home when experiencing flu-like symptoms
 2. Wash hands thoroughly and often
 3. Bring hand sanitizer when attending festivals, concerts or other events
 4. Sneeze or cough into arms or sleeves
 5. Frequently clean common surfaces like kitchen counter-tops, keyboards, phones and doorknobs

In the workplace, an employee who receives the public should, where possible:

1. Keep a distance of more than 2 metres from clients
2. Have a physical barrier (window, plexiglass partition, etc.) between the client and the reception
3. Limit sharing of equipment (for example, pens, phones) with co-workers and clients
4. Ensure the hard surfaces of the work area are cleaned with regular household cleaner at least daily or when changing work stations
5. Wash hands frequently and limit touching your own mouth, eyes, and nose to prevent any virus from being transmitted from hands to mouth, eyes, or nose
6. Have posted information for clients that encourages the use of good hygiene practices (wash hands, cough into sleeve, etc.)

Q) 4. How do I know when to stay home?

A) If you're sick with flu-like symptoms, you are to stay home until you are symptom-free, feeling well and able to fully participate in all normal day-to-day activities. There may be situations where the direction about how long to stay off work differs. Please check with your manager for more information specific to your individual workplace.

Flu-like symptoms are fever and/or cough with one or more of: unusual tiredness, head/muscle/joint aches or sore throat. Contact your manager as soon as possible if you are experiencing these symptoms.

- Q) 5. If I am exposed to individuals (eg. Family members, co-workers) with symptoms, should I stay home from work?**
- A) No. Until **you** display the flu-like symptoms, you should maintain your normal daily activities, including coming to work and socializing.
- Q) 6. Can I or should I get the H1N1 vaccine?**
- A) Yes. Presently, there is no vaccine available but one is in production and will be available in the future. Employees will be informed as soon as possible about the availability and the distribution of the vaccine (eg. Flu clinics).
- Q) 7. Can I take both the seasonal flu vaccine and the H1N1 vaccine?**
- A) Yes. The seasonal flu vaccine will be available in the Fall and we will inform employees about the availability of the H1N1 vaccine.
- Q) 8. Is it mandatory to take the vaccine?**
- A) No, it is the employee's decision as to whether s/he is vaccinated. However, the departments of Health Promotion and Protection (HPP) and Health (DOH) encourage the use of the vaccine for the seasonal flu as well as H1N1, when available. Should you have any questions or concerns about the HINI vaccine, please contact your local public health office.
- Q) 9. Can I get H1N1 more than once?**
- A) You can't get the same strain of H1N1 twice, but if the strain changes, you could get the new form of H1N1.
- Q) 10. Am I at higher risk if I am pregnant and, if so, how can I protect myself and my unborn child?**
- A) Pregnant women are not more likely to get the flu, but if they do catch the H1N1 flu virus, they are more likely to suffer complications, like pneumonia and severe respiratory distress, which can put both mother and baby's health at risk. Severe complications from the flu could lead to early delivery or miscarriage. The risk of complications is greater in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy. Early treatment can help to reduce the risk of complications, so it's important that pregnant women speak to a medical professional if they develop flu symptoms, and seek medical care if the symptoms worsen.

This is why it's important for mothers-to-be to take the following steps to help protect their health:

Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) advises all Canadians to:

- wash hands thoroughly with soap and water, or use hand sanitizer (ie. an alcohol-based hand-rub)
- cough and sneeze in your arm or sleeve, not your hand
- keep common surfaces and items clean and disinfected
- keep doing what you normally do, but stay home if sick
- seek medical care if you have flu-like symptoms
- check the www.fightflu.ca for more information

It's important for pregnant women and the people around them to follow these guidelines to help reduce the risk of H1N1 exposure, which decreases the chance that moms-to-be will pick up the virus.

It's important that we continue to go about our daily lives during the H1N1 flu pandemic. PHAC recommends that pregnant women continue normal activities like going to work, community events or worship services. Caution should be taken; however, when entering situations where there are many people in close quarters with little control over personal contact.

It's recommended that pregnant women be even more vigilant with hand washing and carrying a hand sanitizer, as well as other infection control measures. This will help to reduce the risk that pregnant women will pick up the virus in these types of settings.

Your medical professional will decide if antivirals are necessary for you, but in order to be effective, they must be administered within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms, so it's important to contact a health professional as soon as you start to feel sick.

Q) 11. Can my manager tell me to stay home if I've been exposed to H1N1?

A) No, exposure is not a reason to send an employee home from work. You should continue to perform your normal daily activities unless **you** have flu-like symptoms.

Q) 12. If I'm displaying flu-like symptoms and required to stay home, will I get paid?

A) If you are a bargaining unit employee (Civil Service, Highway Workers or Corrections), your sick leave entitlement will be in accordance with your Collective Agreement. Please refer to the applicable articles in your Collective Agreement which define the sick leave benefits and the category of employees who are entitled to sick leave. If you are an excluded civil service employee, your sick leave entitlement will be as per the Civil Service Act & Regulations. Casual employees and part-time employees in Local 480, Corrections are not entitled to sick leave benefits. If you are unable to determine your entitlement or have any questions in relation to sick leave, please contact your manager or HR Consultant.

Q) 13. Can I work from home while displaying the symptoms of H1N1 so as to not impact either my leave banks or my pay?

A) In the event that an employee is displaying HINI symptoms, yet feels well enough to work, the employee should discuss with his/her manager the option of working from home. The circumstances and operational considerations will have to be reviewed by the manager on a case by case basis.

Q) 14. If I am sick and being paid for staying home, how will this leave be recorded?

A) Leave will be recorded as it normally would be in the case of an illness.

- Q) 15. If I don't get paid for staying home due to flu-like symptoms (eg. casual employment, part-time employees in Local 480, Corrections) or have sick leave exhausted and I decide to come to work, can my manager send me home?**
- A) Yes. The Employer has a responsibility pursuant to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* to take every reasonable precaution to ensure the health and safety of persons at or near the workplace. Should an employee have flu-like symptoms which would otherwise require them to remain home, the manager does have a right and responsibility to send the employee home in order to maintain the health and safety of the workplace.
- Q) 16. If I stay home and don't get paid, can I apply for sick leave benefits under the Federal Employment Insurance?**
- A) The existing rules, requirements and waiting period would apply in the event that an employee makes application for sick leave benefits pursuant to the *Employment Insurance Act*. Access to information is available at <http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/ei/types/special.shtml>
- Q) 17. Do I need a doctor's note or medical documentation?**
- A) If you have spoken to your manager and will be staying home, you will not be required to go to your doctor/get a medical form. This applies to all bargaining unit employees (Civil Service, Highway Workers and Corrections) and excluded civil service employees. Managers and employees should not contact Manulife for the first five consecutive work days of absence (exchange five consecutive work days to forty (40) consecutive working hours for eligible Local 480, Corrections employees). If the employee's situation becomes more complicated and it appears as though the absence will continue past five consecutive work days, appropriate documentation will be required. This documentation will take the form of either a Form 444 or, if the employee opts to utilize the STI Program offered through Manulife, the appropriate documents will be forwarded from their office.
- Q) 18. What should I do if my symptoms persist past the five consecutive work days?**
- A) Should your symptoms persist past the five consecutive work days, you should see your health care practitioner as you will require appropriate documentation (Form 444 or forms from Manulife) for this extended period. Bargaining unit employees will be required to provide a certificate from a health care practitioner in accordance with the Collective Agreement as the sick leave period would be for more than five consecutive work days. The requirement for a medical certificate for an excluded civil servant will be in accordance with the Civil Service Regulations.

- Q) 19. If my child is sick, can I stay home with them?**
- A) Bargaining unit employees (Civil Service, Highway Workers and Corrections) should refer to their respective collective agreements to determine entitlement to family illness leave. Excluded employees are entitled to family illness leave in accordance with the Civil Service Regulations. Employees who are not entitled to such benefits or have exhausted leave entitlements can apply for unpaid leave or other leaves in accordance with the applicable Collective Agreement or Civil Service Regulations. Employees are entitled to a maximum of three days of unpaid leave per year in accordance with the Labour Standards Code.
- Q) 20. If the school or daycare closes due to H1N1, am I entitled to pay if I'm the primary caregiver for my child/children?**
- A) All employees who require child care should have alternate methods, where possible, of ensuring their child is looked after in cases such as storm days, in-service days or any school closures. An employee has the option of requesting a paid leave, such as vacation, or an unpaid leave in accordance with the applicable Collective Agreement or Regulations.
- Q) 21. If a co-worker or client is displaying flu-like symptoms, do I have the right to refuse work?**
- A) You can exercise your right to refuse under the *Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) Act* as long as you have reasonable grounds for believing a health and safety issue exists. You should first report it to your manager, then to your joint occupational health and safety committee or safety representative. If you are not satisfied with the Employer actions to address your concerns, at any time you can report it to the Health and Safety Division of the Department of Labour and Workforce Development (LWD). An OH&S Officer would be assigned to assess the situation. Under the OH&S Act, each work refusal is considered on its own merits.
- Q) 22. Will I have to do someone else's work?**
- A) There will be unique circumstances that may require the reassignment of duties.
- Q) 23. What is the Employer doing to ensure that I am safe at work? Will I get a mask if I have close contact with others?**
- A) If H1N1 has been identified through a workplace hazard assessment as a potential hazard and exposure cannot be prevented or minimized in any other way (ie. by engineered or administrative controls), then the Employer is required to provide personal protective equipment as the last line of defense to protect your health and safety. The use of masks or other types of respiratory equipment would be determined through the workplace hazard assessment.
- The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) does not recommend that members of the general public wear surgical masks to protect against contracting human swine influenza. Evidence shows that this is not effective in preventing transmission of influenza in the general public. People often use masks incorrectly, or contaminate them when putting them on and taking them off, which could actually increase the risk of infection.

- Q) 24. If I am a First Aid attendant, am I responsible for providing first aid to someone who has flu-like symptoms?**
- A) As the designated First Aid attendant at the work site you must be available to provide first aid services to the extent of your training. As an attendant, you would be required to use all appropriate personal protective equipment to protect yourself from exposure.
- Q) 25. Will services be reduced or closed?**
- A) Similar to our Storm Day Policy, a committee of senior officials at the Department or regional level would recommend any reduction of services or closure of offices to the Deputy Minister to the Premier, who will make the final decision. Communications Nova Scotia would disseminate such a decision.
- Q) 26. Where do I go for questions that I have about coming to work?**
- A) Your manager is the best point of contact and information will be made available to employees as soon as information is confirmed.
- Q) 27. Will an information phone line be set up?**
- A) The Province has a new health line called HealthLink 811. When you call 811, registered nurses will give you the advice and information you need and provide reassurance concerning all kinds of general health issues and questions, including flu-like symptoms. Advice and information may include a recommendation to see your doctor or visit your local emergency department. You can also obtain information about health issues and services available in your community. If you have work-related questions, you should contact your manager or your human resource representative.
- Q) 28. Do I have the right to know if my co-worker has H1N1?**
- A) No. Sharing this information with co-workers is presumed to be an unreasonable invasion of an individual's personal privacy and would be a violation of the FOIPOP Act.
- Q) 29. Is there going to be the regular seasonal flu clinics that the Province annually organizes for employees?**
- A) Clinics for the seasonal flu will not be scheduled until the H1N1 vaccination program is complete. If you are over 65 and would like to have the seasonal flu vaccine immediately, please contact your health care provider. We will be notifying all employees mid to late November of the status of the seasonal flu clinics. Final decisions will be made as the epidemiology of seasonal and H1N1 influenza evolves.
- Q) 30. Are the broadcasted flu clinics just for government employees only?**
- A) Yes, family members will have to make alternate arrangements through public clinics or other advertised options.

Q) 31. Are clinics being held in the regions?

A) Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal (TIR) is arranging regional clinics and when locations are confirmed they will be posted on the PSC web site. Further information on how to make arrangements for the vaccine will be sent as soon as we have details.

Q) 32. Do employee clinics include agencies, boards and commissions?

A) Yes. If you are an employee of ABC's such as UARB, NS Gaming Corporation or the Medical Examiner's Office you can attend these clinics. You will be required to complete a form prior to receiving the flu vaccine. Please bring your government identification.

Q) 33. In many cases, wait times at the H1N1 Flu vaccine clinics are lengthy. If I am in the line-up during my regular work hours, will I get paid?

A) Yes. This time would be considered part of your medical appointment time. If you are not entitled to medical appointment time, we encourage you to attend the clinics available outside your work hours.

Q) 34. Do employees who need to be with their children/dependents requiring the H1N1 flu vaccine receive pay while attending the clinics during working hours?

A) Due to the extenuating circumstances of H1N1, family illness leave will be approved for this purpose. If you are not entitled to family illness leave, we encourage you to attend the clinics available outside your work hours.