

To be released: June 17, 2009

Influenza Update

On June 11, the World Health Organization announced that the scientific criteria for “pandemic” had been reached. This decision is based on the spread of the virus and not the severity of illness it causes. The virus has caused sustained community level outbreaks in more than three countries across two World Health Organization regions.

The H1N1 virus has been officially reported in 76 countries around the world, is present in Canada, and is present in communities across Ontario. This includes remote and isolated First Nation communities and municipalities within the Northwestern Health Unit’s catchment area.

The Northwestern Health Unit is monitoring the progress of the H1N1 flu virus in our catchment area. Of over 2000 laboratory confirmed cases in Ontario, 26 have been identified in our region.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is working with the Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion, Health Canada and other provinces and territories to develop guidance documents for health care professionals on the treatment of H1N1 influenza.

Ontario’s current policy with respect to the use of antivirals, in this case Tamiflu, is to provide for early treatment. This reduces the duration and severity of the illness. The use of antivirals for early treatment is an established policy within both the Ontario Health Plan for an Influenza Pandemic as well as Canada’s Pandemic Influenza Plan for the Health Sector. There is currently no policy with respect to prophylaxis (treating people with no symptoms as a preventive measure).

Globally, symptoms of the virus remain moderate, with most people recovering at home without medical treatment. If experiencing severe respiratory symptoms people are asked to contact their primary health care provider. Most of the cases of H1N1 flu virus in Ontario have presented as mild symptoms.

Symptoms are similar to seasonal influenza including headache, chills and cough followed by fever, loss of appetite, muscle aches and fatigue, runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may occur in adults as well as in children. In more severe cases, or in people with chronic conditions, complications such as pneumonia may develop.

The best defense against influenza remains:

- Washing your hands often
- Sneezing and coughing in your sleeve
- Avoiding touching your eyes, nose or mouth
- And if you get sick with the flu, stay home and limit contact with others.

The Northwestern Health Unit is working with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Public Health Agency of Canada, the First Nation and Inuit Health Branch and Health Canada and will continue to communicate information to the public, health professionals, and the media.

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