

H1N1 Myths and Facts

The amount of information circulating about the H1N1 'swine' flu pandemic can be overwhelming. Your pharmacist is available to help separate fact from fiction. The facts below will help provide you with accurate information, but bring any of your unanswered questions about H1N1 to your pharmacist.

Myth #1: Wearing a surgical mask when out in public places is the most effective method to prevent catching the H1N1 flu virus.

Facts: Generally speaking, wearing a mask doesn't provide much – if any – protection from the virus and in fact it can heighten the risk for contamination when used improperly.¹ If you have flu symptoms or are caring for someone who has been infected with H1N1, you can use a surgical mask but it is important to understand how to use it properly.² You can speak with your pharmacist about buying and using a mask. Protective eyewear is also recommended for the caregiver. The most effective ways to prevent the flu are some of the simplest to do, such as washing your hands frequently or using alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

Myth #2: A pandemic means that there is nothing that people can do to prevent the virus from spreading.

Facts: A "pandemic" simply means that multiple countries are affected and that humans are easily spreading the virus to each other. A pandemic has been officially declared by the World Health Organization but pandemics can be mild, moderate or severe. At this time the H1N1 pandemic is considered moderate.³ Public health experts and agencies are giving simple, straightforward advice about prevention such as frequent hand washing, avoiding contact with those who are infected or unwell (a distance of about two metres) and keeping your hands away from your nose, mouth and eyes.

Myth #3: It's easy to tell the difference between a cold, seasonal flu and H1N1.

Facts: It's not easy to tell the difference between seasonal flu and H1N1. Like seasonal flu, H1N1's symptoms are cough, fever, sore throat, runny nose, headache and body aches. Some people with H1N1 have also experienced vomiting and diarrhea.⁴ Cold symptoms are usually a bit different, characterized by nasal congestion and unlikely to be accompanied with a fever.

Myth #4: There will be an inadequate supply of the H1N1 vaccine available to protect Canadians.

Facts: The Government of Canada is purchasing 50.4 million doses of H1N1 vaccine. The government has a long-standing contract with pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline to meet Canada's needs for vaccine during a pandemic.⁵ The vaccine is not yet available, but the Public Health Agency of Canada estimates that vaccinations will begin soon. The regular annual flu shot doesn't provide protection against H1N1.

Myth #5: Once school starts, if any child becomes ill with H1N1 at my son or daughter's school the school will close.

Facts: The Public Health Agency of Canada is recommending against school closures at this time because they are not deemed effective in stemming the spread of the virus.⁶ The most important steps to take to prevent its spread are identifying children or staff who are ill or have symptoms consistent with H1N1, informing anyone with the symptoms of the virus to stay at home, coughing and sneezing into your arm or a tissue and frequent hand washing.

Myth #6: The H1N1 flu virus impacts all age groups equally.

Facts: Several age groups appear to be more susceptible to the H1N1 flu virus. Adolescents and young adults, as well as pregnant women appear to be at higher risk or vulnerable to infection. Those with underlying health conditions such as diabetes or asthma and First Nations people are also at greater risk.⁷

Myth #7: I can catch the H1N1 'swine' flu by eating pork.

Facts: People cannot get H1N1 from eating pork.⁸ Cooking meat properly is important for reducing the risk of foodborne illness.

Myth #8: A diagnosis of H1N1 is catastrophic, there is nothing that can be done to treat it and few people recover.

Facts: Most people who have contracted H1N1 flu have fully recovered and did not require hospitalization or medical care.⁹ When symptoms are mild in an otherwise healthy person, H1N1 can be treated with the same methods as seasonal flu. A pharmacist can help provide advice about managing symptoms using over-the-counter medications. Individuals requiring prescription antiviral treatment need to promptly see their physician, for example, people who have severe symptoms, those whose condition is rapidly deteriorating, have underlying health conditions or are pregnant.¹⁰

Myth #9: There are no effective treatments for the H1N1 virus.

Facts: So far, research shows that two prescription antivirals are effective in treating H1N1 – Tamiflu (oseltamivir phosphate) and Relenza (zanamivir). The Public Health Agency of Canada is recommending the use of antivirals only when H1N1 symptoms are moderate to severe and a patient is at great risk for complications. The Government of Canada and individual provincial governments have stockpiled antiviral medication, but it needs to be used in appropriate circumstances so that there is enough available when it is truly needed.¹¹

1 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/inf-mask-masque-eng.php>

2 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/guidance-orientation-05-03-eng.php>

3 http://www.euro.who.int/influenza/AH1N1/20090611_11

4 http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/fs-fr_h1n1-eng.php

5 http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/faq_rg_h1n1-eng.php#vac

6 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/interim-provisaires0819-eng.php>

7 http://www.cmaj.ca/earlyreleases/31aug09_editorial.shtml

8 http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/faq_rg_h1n1-eng.php#faq6

9 http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/faq_rg_h1n1-eng.php#faq5

10 http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/notes/h1n1_use_antivirals_20090820/en/index.html

11 http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerthe/h1n1/faq_rg_h1n1-eng.php#faq2



H1N1 Checklist

The currently circulating influenza virus, known as H1N1, continues to infect numerous people around the world. Because it is difficult to contain the virus, it is up to individuals to do what they can to stay healthy and prevent the spread of illness. This checklist from your pharmacist will help you take steps to protect yourself and those around you.

Stay Informed

- Visit credible websites, such as www.health.gov.on.ca or www.who.int or speak with your pharmacist, doctor or other health-care professional for updated information on the pandemic situation and the H1N1 virus.
- Know the difference between H1N1, seasonal flu and a cold. H1N1 has similar symptoms to the seasonal flu, including cough, fever, sore throat, runny nose, headache and body aches. The H1N1 virus is a different type of flu virus than those which usually cause the seasonal flu. Colds are less likely to cause fever or body aches, and usually include nasal congestion.
- Keep in mind that the virus is spread in the same way as the seasonal flu virus – through droplets that are created when people cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can be transferred through person-to-person contact, in the air or by contact with contaminated surfaces.

Prevent Illness

- Wash your hands frequently. Use warm, soapy water and wash for as long as it takes to sing the ABC song (i.e., 15 to 20 seconds).
- If there is no soap and running water close by, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to clean your hands. Apply some of the sanitizer to your hands and be sure to rub your hands together until they are dry.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle that includes adequate sleep, drink plenty of fluids, enjoy healthy foods, and stay active.
- Keep your distance from individuals who appear to have influenza. You can help to minimize the spread of the infection by staying 2 metres away from others who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, mouth or nose.
- If you are ill, cough or sneeze into your arm or a tissue, rather than on your hand.
- Minimize your time spent in crowded settings whenever possible.
- Get your annual flu shot to protect against seasonal influenza. In Ontario, the flu shot is free for everyone. This flu shot will not protect you against the H1N1 virus, but it is effective at reducing illness due to the seasonal influenza virus. The vaccine to protect against H1N1 will be available soon.

Work, School and Travel Tips

- Stay home from work or school if you have symptoms of influenza through the duration of your illness.
- Do not travel if you are ill with influenza symptoms.
- Carry an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with you if you are not close to a source of soap and running water to cleanse your hands frequently.

Treating Illness

- If you or someone you are caring for experience symptoms of influenza contact your healthcare provider or call Telehealth Ontario (1-866-797-0000).
- If you become ill with the flu, check with your health care professional to see what next steps you should take to treat your symptoms.
- Drink fluids and get plenty of rest when you are ill.
- Continue to wash your hands regularly and use proper cough/sneeze etiquette.
- Limit your contact with others as much as possible.
- Ask your pharmacist about over-the-counter products to help manage specific symptoms (e.g. acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever and body aches). You may wish to be proactive and keep some basic over-the-counter products at home to avoid trips to the pharmacy if you are ill.



Speak with your pharmacist regularly for updated information about H1N1 and the availability of the vaccine.

H1N1 MEDICATION OPTIONS

Understanding Medications for the Prevention and Treatment of H1N1 “Swine” Flu

Many people have questions about medications that prevent or treat the H1N1 flu. The most important medication available is the vaccine that prevents the flu, and that will be offered to everyone six months of age and older. Prescription antiviral medications are a potential treatment option and over-the-counter medications can help manage specific symptoms. A pharmacist can help you to understand when and how to use these medications.

Prevention: Questions about the H1N1 vaccine

Q. Where can I get the H1N1 vaccine?

The H1N1 vaccine has been made available in Ontario for priority groups, and over time it will be available for all Ontarians. The vaccine can be obtained through a public health immunization clinic, and some doctor's offices may also have a supply of the vaccine. To find a public health clinic or the list of groups currently prioritized for vaccination, visit [www.health.gov.on.ca /en/ccom/flu/](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/ccom/flu/).

Q. How does the H1N1 vaccine prevent H1N1 flu?

Vaccines, including the one for the H1N1 virus, are given to build immunity against a disease through the production of antibodies. As a result, the next time a person is exposed to the virus, the body knows to respond by fighting the virus.

Q. How long will it take for me to be immune to the H1N1 virus?

For the majority of people, immunity to the virus develops in about 10 days after receiving the shot.²

Q. What is the difference between “adjuvanted” and “unadjuvanted” vaccine?

Adjuvanted vaccines have a substance in them to boost the body's immune system response to the vaccine.³ Adjuvants are in many of the vaccines that people are very familiar with such as tetanus. The adjuvant in the H1N1 vaccine that is being given in Canada contains natural ingredients such as water, squalene oil and vitamin E. Unadjuvanted vaccines, such as the H1N1 vaccine that is being offered to pregnant women, do not contain the ingredients which enhance the immune system. There is less safety data available for giving the adjuvanted vaccine to pregnant women.

Q. Should I be getting the seasonal flu vaccine as well?

In Ontario, seasonal flu shots were made available to people aged 65 and over and residents of long-term care homes in October.⁴ The seasonal flu vaccine will be available to the rest of Ontarians over the age of six following the H1N1 flu vaccination program in December and January.⁵

Q. If I think I have had the H1N1 flu already, should I still get the vaccine?

Usually, once a person has had the specific flu virus and recovers, their body produces antibodies that provide immunity to the virus. If a lab has confirmed that an individual has had the H1N1 virus, then the vaccine is unnecessary.⁶

Q. What are the potential side effects of the H1N1 vaccine?

The side effects of the H1N1 vaccine are similar to those reported with the seasonal flu vaccine.⁷ The most commonly reported side effects⁸ were minor and included pain, swelling and redness at the injection site, as well as fatigue, joint pain and headache. For younger children, there were a low number of reports of fever and drowsiness. Irritability and loss of appetite were also reported.

Treatment: Questions about prescription antiviral and non-prescription medications

Q. What are the names of the antiviral prescription medications that work for treating the H1N1 flu virus?

There are two different antiviral medications that are effective in treating the H1N1 flu, Tamiflu (oseltamivir) and Relenza (zanamivir). Tamiflu is a medication taken by mouth, while Relenza is inhaled. They can only be prescribed by a doctor or nurse practitioner. With a prescription, they can be obtained from a pharmacy.

Q. How do I know if I need treatment with antiviral medications for my flu-like symptoms?

Speak to your healthcare provider or determine if you need to see your provider by using the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's patient self-assessment tool. It is available at <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/ccom/flu/> by selecting "Flu Self-Assessment Tool" on the left hand menu.

Q. My prescriber did not recommend an antiviral medication for me. Why not?

While a prescriber can best explain his or her decision, there are a number of reasons why an antiviral medication may not be appropriate for you. Antiviral medications are most effective if given within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms. The Public Health Agency of Canada is recommending that only people with moderate to severe flu symptoms — and who are at greater risk of complications — receive treatment with antivirals.⁹ It is important not to over-prescribe antiviral medications because the viruses they fight can adapt and become resistant to the medications making the drugs less effective when they are needed most.¹⁰

Q. Can these antiviral medications be taken to prevent the H1N1 flu?

For the population at large, vaccination is the best way to prevent catching the H1N1 flu and antiviral medications are not recommended for prevention.¹¹ Regular hand washing, avoiding contact with those who are unwell, keeping your hands away from your nose, mouth and eyes are all effective ways to prevent getting the flu.

Q. What non-prescription medications can be used to treat the symptoms of H1N1 flu?

If you get the flu, most symptoms can be managed with rest, fluid and non-prescription medications that treat fever, headaches, body aches, sore throat, stuffy nose and cough. It is important to speak with your pharmacist so that you or your child takes the most appropriate appropriate medication.

1 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/vacc/know-savoir-eng.php>

2 Ibid

3 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/vacc/options-eng.php>

4 http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/news/release/2009/sep/nr_20090924.aspx

5 http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/news/release/2009/sep/flu_vacc_rollout_bg_04_20090924.pdf

6 http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/faq_rg_h1n1-eng.php

7 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/vacc/know-savoir-eng.php>

8 http://www.gsk.ca/english/html/our-products/docs-pdf/Arepanrix_PIL_CAPA01v01.pdf

9 Ibid

10 http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/h1n1/faq_rg_h1n1-eng.php

11 Ibid

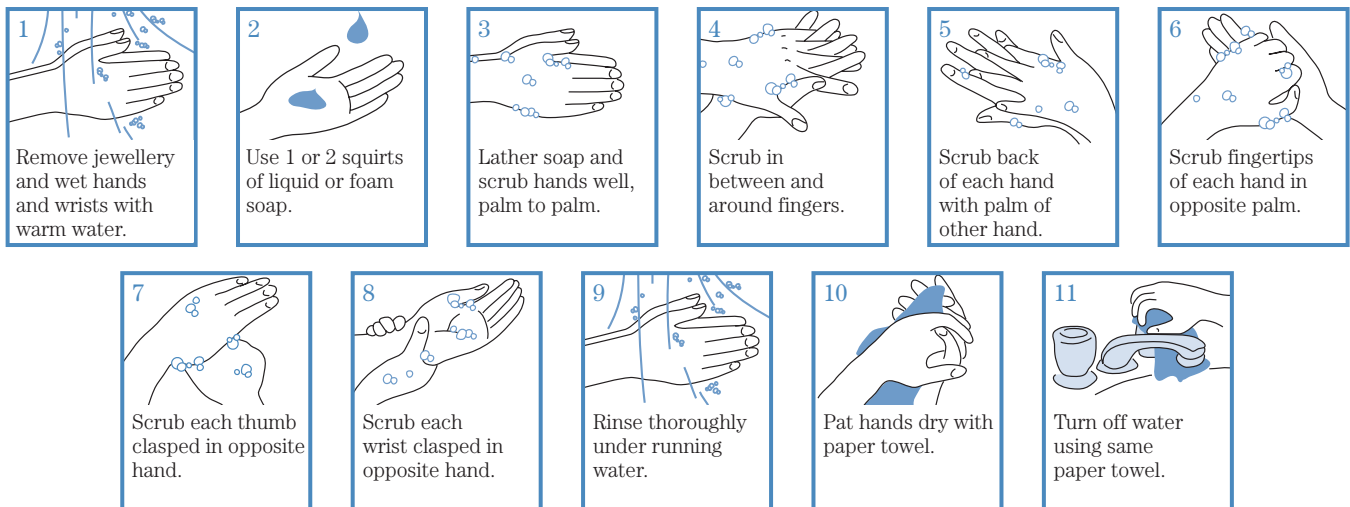
Handwashing

To wash hands properly, rub all parts of the hands and wrists with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. Wash hands for at least 15 seconds or more. Pay special attention to fingertips, between fingers, backs of hands and base of the thumbs.

- Keep nails short
- Remove watches, rings and bracelets
- Do not use artificial nails
- Avoid chipped nail varnish
- Wash wrists and forearms if they are likely to have been contaminated
- Make sure that sleeves are rolled up and do not get wet during washing

If you have any questions regarding cuts, sores, allergies or pre-existing skin conditions, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000, TTY 1-866-797-0007.

Handwashing with soap and water



Cleaning with alcohol-based hand rub

